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THE SCHOOL IS FOR EVERYONE: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS
OF SCHOOLING DISADVANTAGES IN ORDER TO IMPROVE INCLUSION FOR NON-
ITALIAN STUDENTS.

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation aims to contribute to the literature on the achievement gap among students with immigrant backgrounds. As the global rate of immigration increases, the number of immigrant students is also growing dramatically. Italy, being among the most important destinations for immigration, has seen a significant increase in the number of immigrant pupils over the last decade. In many countries, including Italy, children of immigrants often face unique challenges in their academic journey, leading to lower academic performance and track choices that are not oriented toward university education. These challenges increase the risk of school dropout among immigrant students.

Education is a key predictor for various life outcomes, including physical and mental health, workforce participation and income, life expectancy, and life satisfaction. Recognizing the significance of the achievement gap underscores the urgent need to address the factors contributing to it and the identification of practices aimed at closing it.

The majority of research on the achievement gap originates from the United States, with a primary focus on disparities among various ethnic minority groups, particularly the racial achievement gap. While European studies often address immigrant populations within the context of ethnic minorities, there is a notable scarcity of literature that considers the distinct features of the Italian education system and its impact on immigrant student outcomes. This gap emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary studies that explore the various factors contributing to educational disparities among immigrant students in Italy. Such research is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding and developing effective interventions.

The present research aims to address this gap through four key studies. The first study presents an extensive literature review on the achievement gap in Western countries, outlining the associated factors. The findings of Study 1 underscored highlighting SES factors, particularly family income, parental education, and occupation, as key contributors. Few studies addressed language and community policies, while psychological and relational factors were underexplored. Limited research examined teacher bias, psychological well-being, or the impact of self-concept. The review noted a lack of interdisciplinary studies and insufficient analysis of how these factors interact across different levels.

In a separate review in Study 4 interventions aimed at reducing the gap were overviewed. The finding was most focused on psychological factors like stereotype threat, primarily in the US, with few addressing relationships. Few interventions specifically served immigrant students, and multi-factor approaches were lacking, emphasizing the need for tailored, context-specific strategies and more European and longitudinal research. Limitations included the scarcity of European-focused studies and a broader focus on ethnic minorities.

The second study uses qualitative research to investigate how school choice during the critical transition from lower to upper secondary school is shaped within the context of Italian schools through interviews with teachers and students. This research was conducted in a school in Verona, characterized by a high percentage of students with a migrant background born both in Italy and abroad. Key themes included students' interests, language use, and school experiences, while teachers highlighted class dynamics, early orientation, and peer/parental influence. Migrant students faced additional language and socio-economic challenges, underscoring the need for personalized guidance and effective orientation practices.

The third study builds on insights from the first two studies examining quantitatively, through correlational research, a broader range of factors influencing student's academic outcomes. Specifically, Study 3 explored socio-economic and socio-cultural factors, individual factors, including self-esteem, identity exploration, and identity resolution, and relational factors, perceived support from parents, teachers, and peers. Study 3 showed that while there were no major differences in track choices between native and immigrant students, those with both immigrant parents were more often recommended for vocational tracks and demonstrated lower performance in math and Italian. Higher family income and cultural engagement increased lyceum placement, while lower-income led to technical or vocational recommendations. Maternal education positively influenced lyceum placement, particularly for immigrant students. The initial negative link between immigrant background and academic performance disappeared when socioeconomic factors were considered. Self-esteem impacted performance but did not narrow the gap, and relational variables had minimal effect on closing the performance gap.

Overall, the results highlight the strong influence of socioeconomic factors such as family income and parental education on the academic achievement and track placement of immigrant students. While psychological and relational factors were less explored, the study emphasized the need to examine these aspects both individually and in interaction. The results also pointed out the

underrepresentation of certain countries, including Italy, in research and stressed the importance of multidisciplinary studies that integrate various factors and interventions. The findings underscore the necessity of tailored interventions, personalized guidance, and comprehensive strategies to effectively support immigrant students. This lack of interdisciplinary research and studies considering the interaction of factors, along with the limited number of participants, particularly immigrants, hindered the present research from fully examining these aspects. Together, these studies contribute to deepening our understanding of the multifaceted causes of the achievement gap. They offer insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers into developing targeted interventions that promote educational inclusion and equity and that all students, regardless of their cultural background have equal opportunities for academic success.

Keywords: Achievement gap, Academic track choice, Academic performance, Students with migrant background

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially to my mother, who supported me throughout my journey, despite the distances, and to my sister, who made this experience easier.

I also extend this dedication to all the friends, both near and far, who contributed to my learning experience.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Overview of the Achievement Gap

The term "achievement gap" in education pertains to the disparities and variations in academic performance and scores on state or national achievement assessments among various demographic groups of students (Anderson et al., 2007; Barban & White, 2011). The achievement gap manifests in various aspects such as grades, standardized test scores, course selections, dropout rates, and college completion rates, among other metrics of success. Primarily, it is examined regarding the disparities between African American and Hispanic students compared to their non-Hispanic White peers, with the former typically exhibiting lower academic performance. Additionally, attention has expanded to include disparities among students from low-income families. Over the past decade, scholars and policymakers have increasingly directed their focus towards other achievement gaps, encompassing disadvantaged groups based on factors such as gender, English-language proficiency, learning disabilities, and ethnic minorities. (Ansell, 2011).

1.1.2 Importance of Immigrant Success Within the Community

The number of immigrants and their children is rapidly increasing in many European and North American countries (Martin & Midgley, 2003; United Nations, 2020). This demographic shift has brought attention to the phenomenon of the 'achievement gap', which often highlights inequalities in academic progress between native students and those with an immigrant background globally (Azzolini & Ress, 2015; OECD, 2016).

Recognizing the success of immigrants within the community is vital for fostering social cohesion, economic growth, and cultural diversity (Portes & Vickstrom, 2015). Immigrant students, when provided with equitable opportunities and support, contribute significantly to the fabric of society, enriching communities and driving progress. Therefore, addressing the achievement gap among immigrant students is not only essential for their individual success but also for the prosperity and inclusivity of the broader community.

When migrants move to new countries, they bring a diverse range of skills and perspectives that foster technological innovation and stimulate economic growth. However, increased heterogeneity may pose challenges to social cohesion and economic development (Bove & Elia, 2017). Understanding the impact of cultural diversity on economic growth is crucial for addressing the achievement gap among immigrant students and promoting inclusive communities.

Most people engage in activities within their communities as part of various systems or sectors, such as education, healthcare, law enforcement, and daily routines in housing, parks, and neighborhoods (Grey, 2000; Santiago et al., 2005; Silka, 2007; Silka & Tip, 1994;). This underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the challenges faced by immigrant students in these contexts, as their educational success has far-reaching implications for community well-being and cohesion.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

1.2.1 Migration and Its Impact on Education

The estimated numbers of international migrants worldwide have increased robustly from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020 (United Nations, 2020). In 2021 Germany reported the largest total number of immigrants (874 400) in 2021, followed by Spain (528 900), France (336 400) and Italy (318 400) (Eurostat, 2021). According to the World Migration Report 2022 (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021), Italy is among the 20 top destinations of international migration being the fourth top destinations of international migration in Europe, after Germany, France and Spain. Between January and August 2023 Italy has been the country in Europe with the highest number of immigrants arrived by sea, with 154,162 migrants followed by Spain with 25,887 and Greece with 25,106 (IOM, 2024; McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

While "migration" is commonly defined as the process of moving from one place to another, the term "children of immigrants" does not always exclusively refer to individuals who have personally undertaken this migration. Instead, it can encompass a group of people who are born and raised in another country as second or third generation immigrants (World migration report 2022, 2021).

With the rapid increase in the rate of migration, the number of non-native students is growing in Western countries. In the US, immigrant-origin students have been a vital source of growth for the college population for two decades, with their numbers rising from 3.4 million in 2000 to almost 6.1 million in 2021. This 78% increase in enrollment occurred as total college enrollment rose 22%, from 15.3 million to 18.7 million (International Migration 2020, 2020). Similarly, in Europe, the number of non-native students is also on the rise. In the academic year 2020, 4.4 million international students were studying in countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), marking a 70% increase from a decade ago (2022). Highlights from the EU indicate that 5.1 million immigrants entered the EU from non-EU countries in 2022, an increase of around 117% (2.7 million) compared with 2021. Additionally, 1.5 million people previously residing in one EU Member State migrated to another Member State in 2022, representing an increase of around 7% compared with 2021. According to data reported from the beginning of this century, there were 119,679 non-native students in Italy, comprising 1.47% of the whole school population (World migration report 2021, 2021).

This number had its pick in a.y. (academic year) 2007-2008 with 73000 records, and in 2022, the statistic documents of the Ministry of Education of Italy have recorded 865.388 non-native students in schools of Italy. This number is 10,3% of population of the students in Italy. Thus in 2022, the total number of students of migrant origin has reached 67.5%. The documents show that in the five-year period from 2017/2018 to 2021/2022, the number of students with non-Italian citizenship born in Italy increased from 531,467 to 588,986, representing a growth of over 57 thousand individuals (+10.8%) (MIUR, 2023). Out of this number, 10.9% of non-Italian students are enrolled in schools of Veneto. Verona, with 21.618, students is the seventh Italian city among the top ten cities with the highest number of non-Italian students which is 2,5% of the whole school population (MIUR, 2019, 2023).

1.2.2 Challenges Faced by Immigrant Students in Schooling

In most countries, first-generation immigrant students perform worse academically than non-immigrant students (OECD, 2015). The children of immigrants tend to attain lower levels of education, are disproportionately concentrated in less challenging and less rewarding educational

paths and have a higher risk of dropping out of the education system before completing the regular course (Heath et al., 2008).

Students with immigrant backgrounds face various challenges in their academic journey, including language barriers, discrimination, financial constraints, and the need to build new social connections (Gonzales et al., 2006). Life stressors, according to research, often lead to academic difficulties, emotional struggles, and overall distress among these students (Berry et al., 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Additionally, adolescents experiencing immigration may find it particularly tough to adjust socially, develop their identity, and engage academically (Blanco-Vega et al., 2007; Good. Et al., 2010).

Being an immigrant and facing economic difficulties are two factors that can make it hard for young people to adjust (Coll & Marks, 2012; McLoyd, 1998). Immigrant families often have lower economic status in their new countries (e.g., Beck & Tienda, 2012). When families have less money, children tend to perform worse in school (e.g., McLoyd, 1998). But being an immigrant can also make school harder, even if the family has enough money (Portes, 1999).

1.2.3 Key Indicators and Insights from International and National Reports

Although in many countries education systems have made efforts to diminish the effects of the achievement gap, these issues still persist. The children of immigrants do not appear as capable as they are often performing worse in math, science, and language disciplines (OECD, 2023a). When transitioning to secondary school these students often select less challenging educational tracks, which increases their likelihood of achieving lower academic outcomes after completing compulsory education (Mantovani, 2018). According to official data, also migrant students in Italy frequently face challenges such as delays in their studies, academic underperformance, decreased likelihood of completing their education, higher dropout rates, and a tendency to choose less university-oriented educational tracks (MIUR, 2021).

1.2.3.1 Schooling Delay and Attainment Gap

Educational attainment refers to the proportion of individuals holding a formal qualification at a specific level as their highest educational achievement. It is commonly utilized as an indicator of

human capital, although possessing formal qualifications does not always guarantee that individuals have acquired the necessary skills sought after by employers (OECD, 2022).

Across countries, immigrant students, regardless of their generation of migration, generally attain lower levels of educational achievement compared to native students. This disparity persists both during their schooling years and in their long-term educational outcomes (Alba & Nee, 1997).

While upper secondary education has been nearly universally attained by individuals aged 25-34 across the OECD area, in some countries, 14% of younger adults still lack this qualification: Costa Rica and Mexico have particularly high rates (around 45%), with Colombia (25%), Italy (23%), Spain (28%), and Turkey (36%) also exhibiting significant proportions. In contrast, countries like Canada and Korea have much higher rates of tertiary attainment. Additionally, significant disparities exist among OECD countries in the distribution of tertiary fields of study among individuals aged 25-64. For instance, although an average of 12% of tertiary-educated individuals in this age group completed intermediate upper secondary programs in education systems across the OECD countries, this percentage varies from 5% to approximately 20% (OECD, 2022).

Turning to the Italian context specifically, evaluating how immigrant children are integrated into the Italian school system involves assessing their regular participation in school activities and academic performance. Consistent attendance during the compulsory school cycle is particularly crucial for successful integration (Mussino & Strozza, 2012).

In Italy, immigrant students, including those who arrive in Italy at preschool age, are often disadvantaged and at risk of experiencing delays in their schooling (Mussino & Strozza, 2011).

Data recorded by the Ministry of Education regarding the enrollment of non-Italian students across various educational levels allows for a comprehensive understanding of the foreign student population within Italian schools. The statistics document of the Ministry of Education related to a.y 2021/2022 indicated that over five years of secondary school, the proportion of students on track—meaning those who were progressing through their studies according to the expected timeline and requirements, which is one of the dimensions used to assess the educational and social integration of immigrant students—decreased from 62.3% to 45.0%. In the academic year 2021/2022, 84.8% of foreign students aged 10 regularly attended the fifth grade of primary school, while 28.7% were one year behind and 6.3% were two or more years behind. By the age of 14, corresponding to the first grade of secondary school, the percentage of immigrant-origin students

with a regular course of study stands at 62.3%, while 35.0% were still attending a secondary school grade. Additionally, 28.7% were one year behind, 6.3% are two or more years behind (MIUR,2023).

The immigrant students, in fact, achieve less success than Italians, and their disadvantage increases as they progress from primary school to lower secondary school and then to upper secondary school. Their placement in classes is lower than their age cohort and the forced repetition of some school years result in a situation of delayed academic progress, which increases rapidly as the level of education increases (Mussino & Strozza, 2012). A delay in academic progress is reported by just under a quarter of foreign primary school pupils, by more than half of those in lower secondary school and by almost three quarters of those in upper secondary school.

Indeed, the statistics from the Ministry of Education in Italy show that in 2021/2022 a.y only the 45.0% of age 18 -year-olds were regular students, while 55.0% experienced delayed schooling. Among them, 1.7% were still attending the first year of upper secondary school, whereas 31.1% were in the fourth year. In the same academic year, the percentage of students with academic delay at age 15 increased compared to 14-year-olds by 7.3% from 35.0% to 42.3%. In 2021/2022 academic year, Italian students who were delayed in academic progress were 8.1% compared to 25.4% of non-Italian students. The greatest gap was found in secondary school where the percentages of students with delay become 16.3% and 48.4% respectively (MIUR, 2023).

This situation causes serious difficulties experienced by the children of immigrants. In Italy the biggest difference between immigrant students and their Italian peers is between the ages of 15 and 16, showing how the transition from lower to upper secondary school is the biggest obstacle. An alarming consequence of delay in academic progress is undoubtedly dropout. In 2020, the European Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) indicator showed that the dropout rate for foreign students was 35.4%, which is notably higher than the national average of 13.1% (MIUR, 2022).

In the statistics from 2021-2022, it was found that nearly a quarter of students with non-Italian citizenship in Italy face obstacles in achieving their educational objectives and attending school regularly, which impacts their ability to enter the workforce. This educational attainment gap typically arises between the ages of 17 and 18, resulting in many of these students failing to complete their secondary education (MIUR, 2023). Furthermore, national data suggests that the delay experienced by students with non-Italian citizenship is often attributed to their initial

placement in lower-grade classes upon entry into the Italian education system, coupled with subsequent difficulties in progressing to higher grades (MIUR, 2021).

1.2.3.2 Gap in Academic Performance

As the OECD (2015) data illustrate, immigrant students tend to underperform, particularly in reading, compared to their non-immigrant counterparts, although these differences vary significantly across countries, with less pronounced differences observed in mathematics or problem-solving abilities. In countries like Germany, Italy, and Spain, first-generation immigrant students, born outside the destination country to parents also born abroad, demonstrate lower academic performance than non-immigrant students particularly in reading, where language barriers play a critical role in text comprehension. Second-generation immigrant students, born in the destination country to foreign-born parents, while faring better than their first-generation counterparts exhibit intermediate performance levels particularly in problem-solving and mathematics. However, in countries like Canada, Ireland and the UK both first and second-generation immigrant students show much smaller performance gaps in these areas, achieving high academic standards (OECD, 2015).

According to data from the Ministry of Education in Italy, foreign students are more prone to underperforming and dropping out of school compared to their Italian peers. Specifically, in the 2021/2022 academic year, 62.0% of foreign students graduated with grades of 6 or 7, while the majority of Italian students (63.7%) obtained grades of 8 or higher (MIUR, 2023). Although the majority of non-Italian students graduated, their grades indicate a lower level of performance compared to their Italian peers. Further examination of grades obtained indicates that the majority of non-Italian students graduated with passing grades. This data combined with the statistics derived from Ministry of Education data spanning from 2000 to 2021 highlight a significant gap in academic progress between Italian students and their non-Italian counterparts in Italy (MIUR, 2022 & 2023).

1.2.3.3 Transition Challenges Faced by Immigrant Students in High School

Although the educational literature highlights significant disadvantages for individuals with a migrant background across Western countries, recent research suggests that the children of

immigrants exhibit advantages in their educational track choices (Heath et al., 2008). The children of immigrants enter more demanding academic tracks than native students with a similar socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement (Birkelund, 2020; Dollmann & Weißmann, 2020). This association has been thoroughly documented for Northern European countries with an established history of migration (Tjaden & Scharenberg, 2017; Birkelund 2020; Ferrara, 2023; Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022).

In some countries, research suggests that students from immigrant backgrounds are frequently underrepresented in prestigious schools and are at increased risk of dropping out before completing their education (Heath et al., 2008). Moreover, they often choose shorter educational tracks that do not culminate in university enrollment, favoring vocational secondary schools instead (Werum et al., 2011).

In the European context, Italy is a special case as immigrants face exceptional difficulties in terms of irregularity and precariousness of their legal status (Pastore, 2008). Segregation in the secondary labor market and scarcity of policies aimed at supporting the educational integration of the children of immigrants (Azzolini & Barone 2013; Fellini & Guetto 2019). Existing studies suggest that, unlike in other destination countries, students of immigrant origin (especially those of the 1.5 generation, defined as foreign-born youths who migrated to the host country before age 12) in Italy are less inclined to enroll in academically oriented upper-secondary education (Azzolini & Barone, 2013; Barban & White, 2011; Contini & Azzolini, 2016; Gerosa & Romito, 2021).

In Italy school education is divided into primary school, lower secondary school, and upper secondary school. Moving from lower secondary school to upper secondary school presents students with a pivotal choice between academic high school (lyceum), technical institute, and vocational institute. This transition represents a crucial moment in every student's life, as they face their first significant career choice that will impact and shape their entire educational path (Barban & White, 2018). Therefore, careful planning and guidance in high schools and advice from teachers are essential (Barban & White, 2011). The transition to high school is the time at which most students falter academically, some continuing to struggle throughout their academic life (Eccles et al., 1991). Making a quick decision can sometimes cause failure or even school leaving. While many students face challenges when adapting to a new school environment, several studies

suggest that certain individuals encounter greater difficulties, including suspensions, academic struggles, and conflicts with parents. (e.g., Felner et al., 1981; Simmons et al., 1991).

Data from the Ministry of Education of Italy for the academic year 2019/2020 reveals significant trends in track choices among students with non-Italian citizenship. Of these students, 82.4% pursued secondary school courses, while 9.6% for regional professional training. Further analysis indicates that among those who successfully graduated, 36.5% enrolled in professional institutes, 3.9% in regional Professional Education and Training courses, 44.1% in technical institutes, and the remaining 15.5% chose high schools (MIUR, 2021).

This report highlights the influence of place of birth on track choices among immigrant students. The second generation tends to favor lyceums and technical institutes more often. According to the statistics from MIUR (2023), non-Italian students born in Italy show a higher inclination towards technical institutes and high schools, whereas students born abroad are more likely to enroll in professional institutes followed by technical institutes.

After finishing lower secondary school, immigrant children have a higher dropout risk (Strozza, 2008). They are also more likely than Italians to enroll in vocational and short-term educational tracks rather than more comprehensive paths for further studies (Barban & White, 2011; Mantovani, 2008).

After completing lower secondary school, the children of immigrants and find themselves, much are more likely to enroll in vocational and short-term educational tracks rather than more comprehensive paths aimed at continuing their studies beyond the diploma (Barban & White, 2011; Mantovani, 2008). This tendency, combined with their higher dropout risk (Strozza, 2008), highlights the challenges they face in their educational journey.

In fact, the data from the Ministry of Education in school year 2021/2022 have registered 40.1% of students born in Italy attend technical institutes, 36.4% attend lyceums, the remaining 23.5% attend vocational institutes or professional training courses. For students born abroad, the proportions are different, a higher percentual 37.7% attend technical institutes, and 34.2% vocational courses, while only 28.1% of high schools (14.3% of students born abroad opt for the

service sector and 5.9 % in Industry and Handicraft sector. Over 18.0% attend the two types of technical institutes (MIUR, 2023).

1.3 Factors Contributing to the Achievement Gap

When we find evidence of a persistent or widening achievement gap, the next question might be the factors underlying the gap. Some researchers categorize the predictors of the gap into internal and external dimensions. Internal factors within students' control, such as achievement motivation and academic self-concept, are pivotal (e.g., Dweck, 1986; Guay et al., 2010; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Nicholls, 1984), as are beliefs about one's abilities and efforts (e.g., Caprara et al., 2011; Hau & Salili, 1996; Hess et al., 1987) as well as health and wellbeing (e.g., Patton et al., 2016). External factors, beyond individual influence, are shaped by sociocultural environments including family, school, and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Amiri & El Karfa., 2022; Christenson et al., 1992; Entwisle, 1990; Epstein, 1983; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Stevenson et al., 1990).

Academic outcomes of children and adolescents are influenced by their interactions with significant figures such as parents, teachers, and peers within their social circles (Jun-Li Chen, 2005). These factors are further categorized by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2018) into background and individual characteristics. "Background characteristics" encompass family, socioeconomic, and cultural aspects such as socioeconomic status, education level, family income, family size, and ethnicity. Meanwhile, "individual characteristics" pertain to biological, cognitive, socio-emotional, temperament, personality, and motivational resources inherent to each individual. Moreover, Marks (2010) classifies the explanations of the gap into three main types: socioeconomic, educational, and cultural. It's notable that while these theories may differ in their terminology and emphasis, they consistently recognize the significance of these common factors in shaping academic outcomes and contributing to the achievement gap.

However, a more refined theoretical framework, drawn from Raymond Boudon's (1974) sociological theory, distinguishes the primary, secondary, and tertiary effects contributing to the achievement gap (Argentin, 2023).

Primary effects refer to the direct impact of a student's family background on their academic performance, particularly through the resources and support systems available to them. These effects encompass the socioeconomic and cultural aspects that influence students' academic outcomes even before they engage with formal education. According to Argentin examples of

these factors have been studied in the literature by other researchers. Examples of these factors are: factors related to family background, socio-economic status, and family resources (e.g., Panichella et al., 2021) as well as parental involvement and the educational level (e.g., Barban & White, 2018), the support parents offer to their children (Gonzales et al., 1996), or language barriers (e.g., Marks, 2010; OECD, 2015).

Secondary effects, on the other hand, refer to decisions about educational investments, specifically the choice to continue and persist in an academic path until its completion, regardless of the child's good or poor performance.

In more recent times, increasing attention has been given to what are known as "tertiary effects." Initially, these effects were limited to the processes of grading and evaluations by teachers. However, they can also be conceptualized more broadly as the set of influences that the school system—through its functioning—exerts unfairly on students from different social groups, thereby amplifying the impact of both primary and secondary effects. In other words, the learning disparities between native and migrant students are also shaped by the unequal treatment they receive from teachers and school organizations.

In the following sections, I will briefly introduce key factors influencing the academic achievement of immigrant students, categorized into Family background, and Relational factors, School Environment as well as Language Barriers.

1.3.1 Family Background Factors

- **Socioeconomic status**

Erikson and Jonsson (1996) found that students from affluent and educated families achieve higher academic success, evidenced by better grades, compared to those from less privileged backgrounds. The gap in academic performance is attributed to a blend of inherent characteristics and environmental factors, including socio-cultural resources within families, shaping children's cognitive abilities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Moreover, factors related to the school climate can impact the performance of foreign students (Fergus, 2016).

In many countries, immigrants also usually have a lower economic status and face economic challenges (Spencer et al., 2002). As IDOS (2022) and Italian National Institute of Statistics

(ISTAT, 2022a) report in Italy, the economic status of immigrants paints a stark picture. Over 60% of foreign workers find themselves in unskilled or manual professions, while only 1 in 13 holds skilled employment. These statistics underscore the substantial economic challenges faced by immigrants in Italy and addresses the disparities among the immigrant residents in Italy. Research shows that poverty-related stressors can impact negatively on the academic performance of the students (Spencer et al. 2001).

In a study conducted by Marks (2005), which examined data from 20 countries participating in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), it was observed that socioeconomic background played a predominant role in explaining the differences in academic performance between 15-year-old immigrants and non-immigrants in reading and mathematics.

- **Generational status**

As a background characteristic, generational status indicates an individual's position within their family's immigrant generations. According to Rumbaut (2004), first-generation individuals are born in the host country to immigrant parents. The "1.5 generation" includes foreign-born youths who migrated to the host country before age 12. Second-generation individuals are children born in the host country to at least one immigrant parent. In a research in Italy Mussino and Strozza adjusting Rumbaut's theoretical framework (1997, 2004) to the Italian context, classify children of immigrants into four subgroups based on their birthplace and age at arrival: born in Italy (second generation); born abroad and arrived before age five; born abroad and arrived between ages five and nine; born abroad and arrived at age ten or older. However, this framework has been adjusted to reflect the specific context of the Italian education system, where immigrant children are often placed in lower grades than their age would normally indicate due to initial linguistic disadvantages— a practice that becomes more pronounced at higher educational levels, particularly in lower secondary school, and is especially common among students who arrived in Italy at age 10 or older. The adapted classification was used to better understand the varying effects of age at arrival on academic progression and educational aspirations, in light of the Italian system's approach to addressing language barriers (Mussino & Strozza, 2012).

As can be imagined, there are significant differences in academic performance across generational statuses. In fact, recent immigrants tend to have lower academic assessments compared to second-

generation immigrants: while only 56.2% of recent immigrants reach a passing grade compared to the 39.1% of second-generation immigrants. However, second-generation immigrants are more likely to receive higher grades, with 15.8% achieving 'excellent,' compared to only 9.7% of recent immigrants (Barban & White, 2018).

- **Cultural differences**

Immigrant families often exhibit lower levels of education, employment in lower-ranking positions, reduced income, and less accumulated wealth compared to native families. The educational outcomes of immigrant students are, to a great extent, influenced by these socioeconomic factors. Additionally, cultural differences among various national groups may influence the value families place on education, reflected in incentives and investments in their children's educational endeavors (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Louie, 2001). The cultural explanation, on the other hand, is based on differences in the immigrants' culture compared to the host country, however these differences are highly variable.

Research conducted by Barban and White indicates that children with less educated parents, who reside in rented houses and have more than three siblings, tend to experience significantly lower educational success (2018). These characteristics also play a crucial role in secondary school choice. Specifically, the level of family education holds particular relevance along the educational trajectory, as immigrant students are less likely to enroll in higher-level schools compared to their native peers (Barban & White, 2018).

The cause of this discrepancy could be attributed to the amount of time that immigrant students spend with their families. Due to their low levels of education, these families may struggle to provide adequate support with homework, language usage, and encouragement for studying. Additionally, it seems that immigrants are less inclined to pursue specific academic courses, opting instead for immediate employment opportunities (Barban & White, 2018).

1.3.2 Relational Factors

- **Family involvement**

Family plays a crucial role in the lives of students with migrant backgrounds (García Coll & Marks, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Immigrant families often uphold collectivist values and interdependence (Tseng, 2004), impacting goal-setting and educational support. Parents' values

influence discipline and interactions, affecting students' educational inspiration (Chhuon et al., 2010). These dynamics underscore the significant influence of family in shaping the educational trajectories and attitudes of immigrant students.

Family involvement is critical in high school choice, benefiting gifted students (Sattin Bajaj, 2014). In contrast, high-achieving Latino students may receive inconsistent support. Students' perceptions of parental involvement impact their academic performance (Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002; Urdan et al., 2007). Their interpretation of parental values, and the parent-child relationship, are crucial. Students internalize parental values, shaping their motivation and attitudes toward school (Marchant et al., 2001).

- **Impact of teacher and peer relationships on student achievement**

The relationship between adolescents and their teachers significantly impacts academic performance. Perez-Izaguirre (2019) found that teachers' empathic interactions, classroom climate, and student motivation influence student's outcomes. Similarly, Chhuon et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of teachers in inspiring students toward success.

Moreover, research has unveiled connections between tracking and teachers' implicit biases (Anderson, 2007; Crabtree et al., 2019; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Whitford and Emerson (2019) propose that teachers who appreciate and comprehend their students' cultures foster a more equitable learning atmosphere. These insights underscore the imperative to confront challenges such as tracking and bias in education to guarantee equal opportunities for success for all students, including immigrants and minorities.

Strong connections with peers and teachers play a crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive school environment. These relationships are essential for fostering academic motivation, a sense of belonging, and aiding the academic progress of marginalized students, including first-generation and those from mixed-status families, in navigating the path to higher education (Stanton-Salazar et al., 2011).

1.3.3 School Environment

Improving the school environment is crucial for enhancing the academic success of immigrant students. Disparities in school resources, teacher allocation, disciplinary measures, and ongoing educational support present obstacles that hinder the progress of disadvantaged students.

Addressing structural factors that perpetuate educational inequalities is essential for achieving positive and equitable outcomes (Fergus, 2016). Pre-migration cultural and educational backgrounds significantly influence academic performance, as noted in OECD report of 2015. Moreover, the characteristics of the host country's school system heavily impact student performance (Schleicher, 2015). The Italian school system struggles to effectively integrate new immigrants, resulting in unequal opportunities and integration programs compared to native students (Barban & White, 2018).

1.3.4 Language Barriers

Language proficiency stands as a pivotal cultural aspect, especially for ethnic minorities fluent in the host country's language (Marks, 2010). Moreover, language barriers affecting text comprehension play a significant role in the performance disparities observed among these student cohorts (OECD, 2015).

1.4 Contribution to The Broader Understanding of Educational Disparities

Recognizing the pivotal role of education is essential in the context of understanding and addressing the achievement gap among immigrant students. Education serves as a fundamental predictor for various life outcomes (Hout & DiPrete, 2006), including physical health (Schütte et al., 2013), mental well-being (von dem Knesebeck et al., 2011), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), and life expectancy (Meara et al., 2008), Trust (Easterbrook et al., 2015). Additionally, it influences career success, employment (Edelman & Holzer, 2013; Ali & Jalal, 2018), income, socio-economic status (Britton et al., 2020; Card, 1999), and political participation (Bynner & Ashford, 1994; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Persson, 2013; Stubager, 2008).

Moreover, education significantly shapes general and subjective well-being, quality of life (e.g., Clark et al., 2008a; Diener et al., 1993; Powdthavee, 2010), life satisfaction (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Headey et al., 2008; Powdthavee, 2008). Academic success, therefore, serves as a crucial measure of students' adaptation to school and holds implications for their future achievements (Jun-Li Chen, 2005).

Understanding social disparities in track choices is vital for addressing the intergenerational reproduction of inequality (Borgna & Contini, 2014). By identifying and addressing factors that undermine educational outcomes for specific student groups, such as immigrant students, we can

work towards mitigating economic, social, and moral implications associated with educational disparities. In this dissertation, we will delve into the factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students and explore best practices for addressing it.

The Italian school system struggles to properly include new immigrants, leading to unequal educational opportunities and integration programs compared to native students (Barban & White, 2018). It is essential to tackle the structural factors that perpetuate educational inequalities to ensure positive and equitable outcomes (Fergus, 2016). Failure to address these disparities can lead to long-term economic disadvantages, as students with lower educational attainment tend to experience higher rates of unemployment, lower wages, and reduced career prospects (e.g., Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Card, 1999).

This dissertation aims to investigate the factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students and explore best practices for fostering educational equity. This research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of educational disparities and provides insights into strategies for promoting educational equity and inclusivity. In the following chapters, first the design, method, and objectives of the current study will be discussed. This will be followed by a review of literature from Western countries that focuses on the key factors influencing educational disparities. A qualitative research study will investigate how school choice is shaped during the crucial transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school within the context of Italian schools, based on interviews with teachers and students. Additionally, a correlational study will quantitatively examine the factors identified in the literature review and qualitative study within a sample of lower secondary school students in Verona. Finally, interventions aimed at reducing educational inequalities will be reviewed, culminating in a synthesis of findings and recommendations for improving educational outcomes.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Understanding and Addressing the Achievement Gap Among Immigrant Students

Immigration is a key aspect of globalization. As discussed in the previous chapter the rate of migration is dramatically growing globally. According to the World Migration Report (2022), approximately 281 million individuals were living as international migrants worldwide in 2020, constituting 3.6 percent of the global population. This figure represents an increase from previous decades. Specifically, the total number of people residing in a country other than their country of birth was estimated to be 221 million in 2010, a significant rise from 174 million in 2000 (McAuliff & Triandafyllidou, 2022).

Numerous migrants departed their countries of origin seeking better economic prospects, eventually resettling in wealthier Western nations. In recent times, significant populations have escaped conflict-ridden regions in search of refuge in another country (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016).

In 2022, a report by UNHCR, UNICEF, and IOM documented that approximately 35,170 children and young people migrated to Europe (UNHCR, UNICEF, & IOM, 2022). Immigrant-origin children and youth are defined as individuals with at least one parent born outside the host country, encompassing both first-generation immigrants born outside the host country and second-generation immigrants born within it (McAuliff & Triandafyllidou, 2022; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

As discussed in the previous chapter, education plays a crucial role in shaping individual lives and societal dynamics. With the increasing number of immigrants, it becomes imperative to ensure their successful academic experiences.

In the literature on the achievement gap, numerous studies in sociology (e.g., Vlach & Schizzerotto, 2013; Azzolini & Ress, 2015) and education (e.g., Marks, 2010; Murineddu et al., 2006) have explored inequalities. They've investigated their underlying reasons and factors and sought solutions to narrow the gap. Given the multidimensional nature of human beings, psychology also offers diverse perspectives on this issue. This breadth of research addresses various facets of the achievement gap.

The variety of studies underscores the complexity of issues related to migration, immigrant-origin children and youth, and their education. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the interconnectedness of disciplines such as sociology, education, psychology, and migration studies in addressing the achievement gap. By integrating insights from these diverse fields, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the achievement gap and develop more effective strategies to narrow it.

Furthermore, the diverse perspectives evident in research underscore the importance of examining the achievement gap from multiple angles. These perspectives allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the different types of social, educational, and psychological factors that contribute to the gap. By integrating these varied viewpoints, it becomes possible to identify the most significant factors influencing educational outcomes for immigrant students. This, in turn, enables the design of more targeted and effective interventions. Through synthesizing existing knowledge and undertaking empirical research, this dissertation attempted to not only enhance our understanding of the achievement gap but also to identify evidence-based interventions and policies that address these factors holistically, promoting educational equity and inclusivity for immigrant students.

In the following sections of this dissertation, we will delve deeper into the existing literature, examining the history of research and studies on the achievement gap. Subsequently, in this chapter, we will outline the aims, methodology, and design of the present research.

2.2 History Studies on Factors Contributing to Achievement Gap

Since the publication of the Coleman Report in the 1960s, which first brought attention to the gap in academic achievement between Caucasian and African American students, researchers have extensively examined the roots of this disparity (Coleman, 1966; Jencks & Phillips, 2011; Jones, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 1991-1999). The report highlighted the segregation of African American students and teachers from their white counterparts and the lower academic performance of minority students, showing that their achievement was more impacted by school quality than that of white students (Coleman, 1966). This foundational work set the stage for ongoing research into the factors contributing to the achievement gap. While the initial explanations for the achievement gap and lower effectiveness were related to the heritability of

intelligence, particularly focusing on IQ genes. These early empirical studies often centered on race differences (Portes, 2005). However, this perspective was increasingly challenged by further research.

In the years following the report, numerous academics have continued to explore the achievement gap from various perspectives seeking to understand the factors influencing these differences (Celeste et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2020; Mooney, 2018; Slopen et al., 2016; von Stumm, 2017; Wright et al., 2017). This shift marked a critical expansion in the discourse surrounding academic achievement among different racial and ethnic groups.

During the 1970s and 1980s the disparities in academic achievement based on race and ethnicity decreased significantly (Lee, 2002). The research on the racial and ethnic achievement gap then expanded beyond the Black-White gap to include other minorities such as Hispanics and Asian-Americans (e.g., Johnston & Viadero, 2000; Lee & Zhou, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995; Ochoa,2013).

According to Portes (2005) some oversimplified explanations had the tendency to blame the achievement gap to the family of origin, cultural level of family, school and teachers. Other scientific research focused on school poverty or school-constructed motivations for the gap. In fact, some studies, such as a study conducted by Samuel Myers at the University of Minnesota in 1996, utilized statistical analysis to demonstrate the segregation of Black students and their overrepresentation in schools ranked with low math and reading scores. This research highlighted the structural inequalities within the education system, particularly in terms of resource allocation and academic opportunities. These studies highlighted that factors such as school attendance, mobility, and participation in special education or gifted programs are linked to disparities in test scores, particularly in math and reading, reflecting broader structural inequalities in academic opportunities (Myers al., 2004; Shapiro & Purpel, 2004).

In addition to structural factors, psychological aspects also play a crucial role in understanding the achievement gap. A set of experimental studies from the Stanford University conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995) attempted to “understand the psychological factors of success”. The researchers examined the impact of stereotype threat on African American students by comparing

their performance on a verbal GRE test with White students. In the first experiment, the test was presented either as diagnostic of intellectual ability or as a problem-solving task unrelated to ability. The findings showed that when the test was framed as diagnostic, Black students underperformed compared to White students, but when the test was framed as nondiagnostic, both groups performed equally. A second experiment, manipulating only whether participants recorded their race before the test, confirmed that merely making racial identity salient was enough to depress Black students' performance. They concluded that the black students stereotyped by limited ability, experience extra intimidation. They named the phenomenon “stereotype vulnerability” better known as “stereotype threat” (Shapiro & Purpel, 2004; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In addition, research has highlighted the relationship between tracking and teachers' implicit bias (Anderson, 2018; Crabtree et al., 2019; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Teachers who understand and embrace their students' cultures provide a more equitable learning environment. However, a lack of awareness about how giftedness manifests in diverse students contributes to the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students in advanced courses.

Also, anthropologists investigated the reasons for the achievement gap. Some studies explored motivations and aspirations in academic achievement. An important historical study that significantly impacted research on the achievement gap is the multifaceted study by Signithia Fordham (1996). The study explored how the 'hidden' and 'explicit' curriculum shape aspirations and achievements. She noted that differences in cultural, racial, and social background can influence students' responses to the schooling experience. Fordham concluded that patterns of academic success and underachievement reflect processes of resistance in the face of stigmatized racial identity (Fordham, 1996; Shapiro & Purpel, 2004).

Researchers also examined the gap between immigrant students and their native counterparts (e.g., Azzolini et al., 2012; Phalet & Baysu, 2020). These studies have identified a range of factors contributing to this achievement gap. For instance, deficit thinking, which blames the individual for the inequality, has been found to negatively impact academic outcomes (Bottiani et al., 2016; Garcia-Olp et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2016; Silva-Laya et al., 2019). This perspective often imposes unrealistic barriers for students to overcome and is difficult to shift due to societal and

cultural resistance to addressing race (Hunt & Seiver, 2018). Implicit bias among teachers also plays a role, as their unconscious attitudes can influence the expectations they set for students, leading to a self-fulfilling cycle of lower performance (Anderson, 2018).

Building on these insights, scholars inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s sought to address discriminatory schooling practices and biased research. They argued that standardized tests, used to label minority students as underachieving, were biased and that teachers often held lower expectations for these students. This perspective revealed the self-fulfilling prophecy of group-based inequality and demanded changes in educational practices, including the elimination of biased treatment in schools, the inclusion of minority history in curricula, and the examination of events from multiple perspectives (Portes & Salas, 2007).

As research on the achievement gap continued to evolve, policymakers also began to take notice, leading to legislative reforms aimed at closing the gap. One of the most significant interventions in this regard was the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. In 2000, the Election and (NCLB) reports marked a pivotal moment in the history of achievement gap in US education policy. The (NCLB) aimed to reduce the achievement gap by enforcing accountability for the performance of disadvantaged groups, including low-income students, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities. The law mandated annual testing in reading and math and required schools to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress to receive federal funding (U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan, 2022). It insisted that children regardless of color or disability shall go to school together to ensure equality (Meier, 2004). The reports triggered significant discussions and debates on issues like segregation and racial inequality, leading to policy reforms aimed at addressing these problems (Jones, 2013; Lee, 2002). The term "achievement gap" is often used to describe a "Black/white gap," suggesting an implicit and overlooked assumption that race is the primary distinguishing factor between students on either side of the gap (Jones, 2013).

Despite efforts to address educational disparities, educational inequality persists globally, with some disadvantaged minority groups such as Blacks, ethnic minorities, and immigrants lagging behind their peers from the majority. (de Brey et al., 2019; Lee, 2002; Plata et al., 2017; Schleicher, 2015). This disparity in achievement is observable above all throughout the transition from lower secondary school to higher secondary school.

In summary, the study of the achievement gap has evolved significantly since the publication of the Coleman Report (1966). Initially framed as a racial issue rooted in school segregation and structural inequalities, researchers from various disciplines, including psychology and anthropology, have since explored a wider array of factors influencing the gap. Interventions like the *No Child Left Behind* Act sought to address these disparities, though ongoing challenges persist. This comprehensive review highlights that both structural and psychological barriers must be addressed in order to narrow the achievement gap. In the following section, the history of interventions aimed at closing the gap and the contemporary challenges they face will be briefly reviewed.

2.3 History of Interventions in Narrowing the Achievement Gap

In response to the deep-rooted structural and psychological factors contributing to the achievement gap, numerous researchers have studied, developed, and tested interventions over the years. These efforts focus on addressing both external barriers and internal psychological challenges faced by disadvantaged students.

For example, studies have investigated interventions targeting teachers' unconscious biases.

These teacher training programs are aimed at better understanding and empathizing with students from diverse backgrounds. Initial results from these interventions have shown that teachers who receive such training are better equipped to understand and empathize with students from diverse backgrounds. This training helps teachers recognize and overcome any unconscious biases they may have, creating a more welcoming and supportive classroom for all students (Whitford & Emerson, 2019).

The research on interventions has not been limited to teacher training. Academics have also conducted school-based interventions to narrow the gap. Some of these interventions aimed in fostering growth mindsets among students. Academics such as Blackwell et al., (2007) tried to convince a group of low-income minority junior high students that intelligence can improve with hard work. As a result, they reported that according to the teachers, the students exposed to the intervention worked harder and had achieved improvements in performance.

Social psychologists investigated interventions that aim to reduce stereotype threat and boost students' self-regulation and self-esteem. As an example, Joshua Aronson et al. (2002)

administered an intervention involving low-income minority students in Texas who were just beginning high school. The Participants in the experimental group were informed about the adaptable nature of intelligence and learned about the brain's ability to form new connections throughout life. He noted that the stereotyped students exposed to the intervention did much better than students in the control group (Aronson et al., 2002; Good et al., 2003).

Some researchers such as Oyserman et al., (2006), explored the effect possible selves (PSs) influence self-regulation and academic outcomes, particularly for low-income and minority youth. Their intervention aimed to link PSs with strategies for success, integrate difficulties as normal in goal pursuit, and align academic PSs with social identity. Results showed sustained improvements in self-regulation (e.g., attendance, homework) and academic outcomes over two years. The study also highlighted the distinct roles of positive and feared PSs in motivating behaviors and the relevance of prevention-focused self-regulation in high-risk contexts like poverty. The findings emphasize the potential of PSs as a motivational tool for improving outcomes.

Another significant contribution to the field came from Geoffrey Cohen et al., (2006) involving students at the beginning of high school through a self-affirming exercise, which included a task reminding them of their core values. This exercise aimed to build confidence in situations where stereotypes are prevalent (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009).

Cohen and Walton (2007) later investigated whether providing assurance to minority students about common worries regarding social acceptance would positively impact their college performance. The results indicated that while the intervention had no effect on white students, it significantly improved the academic outcomes of black students, who reported studying more, engaging with professors, and achieving higher grades compared to those who did not receive the intervention.

In summary, the diverse range of interventions aimed at narrowing the achievement gap highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by disadvantaged students. From addressing teachers' biases to fostering growth mindsets and enhancing self-regulation, these efforts have shown promise in various contexts. However, significant disparities remain, particularly for immigrant students, necessitating a comprehensive examination of existing interventions. The rationale for conducting this review study lies in the need to synthesize findings specifically related to immigrant students, identify effective practices tailored to their unique experiences, and uncover gaps in the literature

of Western countries. By reviewing these interventions, we aim to provide insights that can inform future strategies and contribute to more equitable educational outcomes for immigrant students.

2.4 Immigration in Italy: Policies and the Educational System

Since the 1990s, Italy has undergone a significant transformation from a nation of emigration to one of immigration. Unlike countries such as Germany and the US which have longer histories of structured immigration policies and integration strategies, Italy's approach has been marked by a focus on short-term emergency responses rather than comprehensive long-term integration efforts. Despite this shift, Italy's immigration policies still prioritize short-term emergency responses over long-term integration strategies, setting it apart from other countries. The Italian education system distinguishes itself by adopting a universalist and inclusive approach, including the integration of migrant children into mainstream classes and offering Italian language instruction during or after school hours (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019).

Immigrant communities in Italy differ significantly from long-established ethnic minorities found in other countries like Germany or the US, such as the Turkish community in Germany or Latinx and Asian groups in the US. Italy's immigrant population is diverse and highly heterogeneous, comprising over 200 nationalities, with the majority originating mainly from Romania (21,04%), Albania (8.11%), Morocco (8.11%), China (6.0%), and Ukraine (4.86%) (ISTAT, 2023). The primary drivers for immigration to Italy are often related to better employment opportunities, with individuals from various regions choosing Italy due to factors such as cultural or geographical proximity (e.g., Albania, Romania, Ukraine) and North African countries (e.g., Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia), seasonal work prospects, or entrepreneurial endeavors (e.g., China) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali [Ministry of Labour and Social Policies], 2021).

While Italy's multicultural policies are moderately supportive according to indices like the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Solano & Huddleston, 2020) and Multiculturalism Policy Index (Queen's University, 2022), societal attitudes toward immigrants are often ambivalent, with negative perceptions fueled by media portrayals of migration associated with illegality and crime (Rubaltelli et al., 2020). Based on the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2018), nearly half of Italians (46%) view immigrants as having a negative societal impact, with only 21% expressing a wholly positive perception. In contrast, in Germany, 27% of respondents hold a negative view, while 44% maintain a predominantly positive outlook.

Italy's education system encompasses distinct characteristics, such as its curriculum structure, teaching methods, and policies related to immigrant integration in schools. These features may significantly influence the educational experiences and outcomes of immigrant students. In Italy, education is comprehensive until the age of fourteen, after which students transition to upper secondary education. At this stage, students have the option to pursue one of three tracks: a general track (*liceo*) geared towards tertiary education, a technical track (*istituto tecnico*) offering theoretical and practical knowledge in a specific occupational field, and a vocational track (*istituto professionale*) designed to train students for specific skilled jobs. While all tracks span five years, some regional vocational schools offer three-year courses. Education is compulsory until the age of 16, allowing students to drop out before obtaining an upper-secondary degree. Despite all tracks providing access to tertiary education, actual enrollment is highly stratified. In the 2012–2013 academic year, 75.0% of students from the academic track, 25.0% from the technical track, and 12.0% from the vocational track enrolled in university (Bonizzoni et al., 2016). According 13th Report Foreigners in the Labor Market in Italy, published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, specifically, in 2020 in Italy, the school dropout rate of young people born in Italy to immigrant parents was 28 percent, the highest among all countries considered, exceeding by 10 percentage points young people born in Italy to Italian parents (XIII Report: Foreigners in the Italian Labor Market, 2022).

Enrollment in upper secondary tracks is not contingent on an entrance exam, and families have the freedom to choose. During the final year of lower secondary education, families receive formal recommendations from teachers. Although non-binding, this guidance significantly influences families' and students' decisions, particularly those with migrant backgrounds (Perino & Allasino, 2014).

Immigrant children in Italy often face unique challenges that influence their educational trajectories. Language barriers are one significant factor, with Italy's relatively brief colonial history and limited immigration from former colonies contributing to fewer linguistic resources for newcomers compared to other European countries (Azzolini & Barone 2013). Many immigrant families in Italy do not speak Italian at home, further complicating children's language acquisition (OECD, 2018). These language difficulties can impact teacher recommendations and influence the educational tracks immigrant students pursue (Bonizzoni et al., 2016). Additionally, immigrants in Italy face significant obstacles in the labor market, often ending up in low-skilled, low-paying

jobs due to segregation (Fellini & Guetto 2019; Panichella et al., 2021). Even immigrants who are highly positively selected may struggle to succeed in Italy's labor market, and this may not necessarily result in higher educational aspirations for their children (Brunori et al., 2020). Italy's stringent naturalization laws pose further challenges for immigrants and their children in obtaining citizenship, affecting their integration into society (Migration Policy Group, 2013). Educational policies aimed at integrating newcomers in Italy are underdeveloped, with civil society often bearing the responsibility for addressing these issues (Azzolini & Barone 2013).

2.5 Rationale of the current study

The achievement gap between immigrant and native students has been extensively studied in countries with long histories of immigration, such as the United States and Germany. These studies typically focus on well-established ethnic minority groups, providing valuable insights into the challenges and barriers these populations face. However, much less attention has been given to newer immigrant-receiving countries like Italy, where immigration is relatively recent and distinct in terms of both its history and societal context.

Most of the research on the achievement gap originates from the United States, where attention is primarily centered on disparities among various ethnic minority groups, particularly the racial achievement gap. In many European countries, research studies frequently consider immigrant populations as part of the larger category of ethnic minorities. In other words, when examining issues related to immigration, researchers often include immigrants within the broader group of ethnic minorities, which encompasses various cultural and racial backgrounds (Morawska, 2008). Limited research exists on the educational decisions made by the offspring of immigrants in newer immigration destinations, particularly in Southern European nations like Italy (Azzolini & Barone, 2013).

The scarcity of interdisciplinary studies especially in the context of Italy is a key gap in the literature. Although individual studies have explored socio-economic, cultural, and relational factors, few have examined these in an integrated manner to understand the complex factors contributing to the achievement gap. Additionally, in Italy specifically, the scarcity of comprehensive data on students' educational trajectories, achievements, and migration histories contributes to the lack of research in this area (Contini & Azzolini, 2016). As a result, the academic pathways and challenges faced by immigrant students in Italy remain underexplored.

This study aims to directly address three key gaps in literature. First, while much of the existing research tends to focus on isolated factors, there is a notable absence of interdisciplinary studies that examine the socio-economic, cultural, relational, and psychological factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of these factors.

Second, there is a need for a thorough examination of these dynamics within the Italian context. As a relatively new immigration destination, Italy presents a unique societal and educational environment. Exploring how these factors manifest and interact within the Italian school system will offer valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by immigrant students in this setting. Finally, while many existing studies on interventions aimed at narrowing the achievement gap focus on racial disparities, particularly in countries like the United States, there is a lack of research that reviews interventions specifically targeting immigrant students. This study aims to address that gap by reviewing and assessing interventions designed to narrow the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. By concentrating on these areas, this research seeks to fill critical gaps in the literature and contribute to the development of effective, evidence-based strategies tailored to the unique needs of these students.

In summary, the present research seeks to address three key gaps in literature. First, it aims to overcome the limitations of studies that focus on isolated factors by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to explore the socio-economic, cultural, relational, and psychological contributors to the achievement gap among immigrant students. Second, it emphasizes the need to thoroughly investigate these factors within the specific context of Italy, a relatively new immigration destination, in order to better understand the unique challenges immigrant students face in its educational system. Ultimately, it seeks to fill a significant gap by reviewing interventions aimed at narrowing the achievement gap, particularly those designed for immigrant students, which are often overlooked in favor of interventions focused on racial disparities in other countries. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the development of effective interventions that promote educational equity and inclusivity for immigrant students in Italy and other Western countries.

2.6 Objectives and Focus of the Research

The history of achievement gap studies underscores persistent disparities in educational outcomes among different racial and ethnic groups, and migrant students despite decades of research and

policy interventions. Building upon existing knowledge, this research aims to delve deeper into the factors contributing to the achievement gap and to identify strategies for addressing these disparities.

The primary objective is to examine the multifaceted nature of the achievement gap, considering various perspectives such as sociologic, relational, and psychological factors contributing to the gap. By analyzing these factors comprehensively, the research seeks to provide insights into the root causes of the achievement gap among immigrant students and identify effective interventions to narrow it.

2.7 Overview of the Studies

The current research has two primary objectives:

a) To identify the underlying factors contributing to the academic achievement gap among students with immigrant backgrounds, including academic performance and track choice, in both Italian students born in Italy or abroad.

b) To identify effective interventions for reducing this achievement gap.

These interdisciplinary objectives will be addressed through a mixed-method research approach. The research begins with a comprehensive review of the literature from Western countries, investigating the primary factors contributing to the achievement gap in non-native students (Study 1a). Additionally, it involves an overview of the literature pertaining to effective interventions and best practices implemented in Western countries to reduce this gap (Study 1b). Given the research's focus on Italy, the identified factors will be examined in the Italian context through a qualitative study (Study 2) and a correlational study (Study 3).

In all studies involving human participants, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona. Participants were recruited voluntarily, following their informed consent to participate, and for minor participants the consent of their parents or legal guardians was obtained. The structure of the work, delineating the objectives and methodologies for each study, is depicted in Figure 1.

2.7.1 Study 1a and Study 1b– Identifying underlying factors and best practices: Two reviews of the literature

Study 1a– aimed to identify the factors associated with the achievement gap among the students with immigrant backgrounds. This study conducted a comprehensive literature review of the achievement gap factors in Western countries, focusing on sociological, relational, and individual factors associated with this gap. The expected result is a deeper understanding of the key factors contributing to academic inequalities.

Study 1b – attempted to identify the best practices and interventions in school contexts aimed at reducing academic disadvantages and enhancing the inclusion of students with migrant backgrounds. The objective of this study was to conduct a review of the intervention studies implemented in Western countries to mitigate the achievement gap among immigrant students. The expected result was a compilation of effective strategies and interventions that can be adapted for use in similar contexts.

To achieve a comprehensive view of the existing literature, the review process followed the method outlined in the following section.

Keywords and search strategy: keywords were defined, and search strings related to topics such as "school delay," "school choice," and "academic gap," alongside the target population (immigrants and related terms) were constructed. These keywords were used across three databases: PsychInfo for Psychology, Eric for Education, and Scopus as an interdisciplinary database. The search was limited to the title and abstract fields.

Screening process: Abstracts were initially identified and screened to remove duplicates and irrelevant records. Following the screening process, relevant abstracts were further categorized based on their association with factors contributing to the Achievement gap (Study 1a), or interventions and good practices (Study 1b).

Studies included in the reviews adhered to the following criteria: Primary indicators of the achievement gap, including a) academic performance and b) educational track choice.

- *Full-text screening*: Qualitative studies underwent full-text screening, resulting in the inclusion and analysis of relevant articles. The design of semi-structured, open-ended question interviews for Study 2 was informed by the data extracted from the qualitative studies included in the review.

2.7.2 Study 2– Identifying the underlying factors in context: A qualitative study with native and non-native students and their teachers in Italy

The main objective of this study was to collect data about psychological, sociological, and educative factors found in the review study (Study1a) within the specific context of schools in Italy. In essence, through qualitative method of research, the study attempted to examine if the factors uncovered in the first study were detectable within the sample population in Italy.

Focus groups (with students and teachers) and interviews (with teachers) were conducted to collect data for this qualitative study. The research aimed to explore psychological, sociological, and educational factors within the specific context of schools in Italy. A public lower secondary school in Verona was selected for its diverse student body, including a significant proportion of migrant and low-income students. The students involved in this section of the study were enrolled in the third year of low secondary school. To this regard, one major consideration throughout this work was that data have been collected during the period November and December of 2022, during the period in which the orientation procedure is ongoing in the Italian schools.

The semi-structured open-ended interview questions were designed to explore various aspects related to students' orientation experiences and perspectives on high school choices, as well as teachers' insights into the orientation process and factors influencing students' decisions. The interviews and focus groups were recorded following the privacy and ethical considerations.

The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach (Mortari, 2010 & 2007) to analyze data collected through audio-recorded interviews and focus groups. This method involves several steps, including familiarization with the material, identification of significant text units, assigning descriptive labels to these units, grouping labels into categories based on similarity, and further organizing categories into macro-categories. Through this iterative process, that involved also an intersubjective confrontation between the involved researchers about the coding, the study aimed

to identify patterns and themes within the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

2.7.3 Study 3– Correlational Research

Through the review and analysis of the literature and the qualitative study, three categories of predictors associated with the achievement gap have been examined: sociological factors, relational factors, and individual factors.

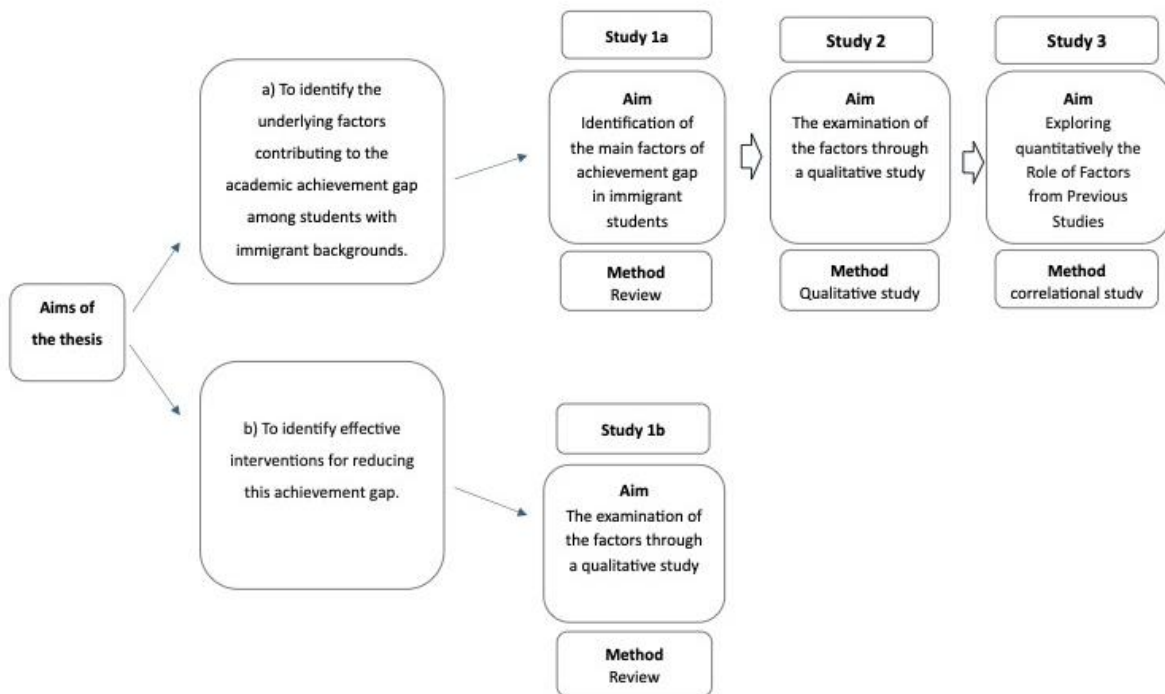
Many studies in literature show that poverty-related stressors can lead to lower grades (e.g. Spencer et al. 2001; Marks, 2005). In many countries, immigrants often face economic challenges due to their lower economic status (e.g. Fullin & Reyneri, 2011; Seghers et al. ,2021; Spencer et al., 2002). Other factors identified in the literature of achievement gap comprise relational factors and the role of family (e.g. Coll et al., ,2012; Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010), teachers (e.g. Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Goodenow, 1993; Perez-Izaguirre, 2019) and peers (i.e. Chhuon et al., 2010; Opland Stenersen et al., 2016).

Additionally, research in literature indicates the effect of identity development during Erikson's adolescent stage on one's ability to build relationships and define personal goals, values, and aspirations (Erikson, 1968). Phinney's studies (1989) further demonstrate the influence of ethnic-racial identity (ERI) on a sense of belonging and identification with one's ethnic group. Musso et al. (2018) emphasize the crucial role of ERI development during adolescence, particularly for youth from ethnic minorities and immigrants, as well as the majority. Exploring and resolving ethnic and racial identity is associated with reduced depression symptoms, higher self-esteem, and academic success for ethnic minority adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). Our analysis aims to comprehend how these sociological, relational, and individual factors collectively influence participants' academic outcomes, specifically academic track choice and performance.

The primary aim of Study 3 is to quantitatively verify the associations between factors identified in previous studies (Study 1a and Study 2) and indicators of the achievement gap, academic track choice, and academic performance in Italy. Using a correlational design, this study attempted to determine if the predictors identified in earlier studies significantly contribute to the achievement

gap. Specifically, the study examined the relationships between three sets of variables—sociological factors, relational factors, and individual factors—and their association with academic outcomes. This analysis is conducted through the administration of surveys to both native and non-native students and their parents in schools located in Verona. Data collection was scheduled to align with the Italian school orientation period, taking place during the school day in November and December 2023. By employing hierarchical regression analysis, we attempted to systematically examine the predictive power of these factors, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the achievement gap.

Figure 2.1 Structure of the current dissertation and aims of the studies



CHAPTER 3

3. The Determinants of Achievement Gap

While the previous chapters explored the broader concept of the achievement gap and its manifestations among immigrant students in the US and Europe, this chapter investigates the underlying factors driving these disparities. Understanding these determinants is crucial for addressing the persistent inequities in educational outcomes and fostering more inclusive school systems.

Despite improvements in European school conditions, significant disadvantages persist, particularly for immigrant students (OECD, 2016). This gap is evident in the unequal segregation in enrollment, with many immigrant students being funneled into vocational schools or institutions that do not typically lead to higher education. Additionally, immigrant students are more likely to drop out of school in nearly every European country (OECD, 2022).

As indicated in previous chapters, in Italy, foreign children are frequently placed in classes below their age-appropriate grade level, a phenomenon we refer to as 'delayed school progress' in this article. This placement is primarily due to language barriers. They face greater challenges throughout their educational journey than their Italian peers, as indicated by lower exam success rates. Consequently, there is a widespread delay in their academic progress, which becomes more pronounced at higher educational levels (Favaro, 2007; Mussino & Strozza, 2008 & 2012; Miur, 2022).

Previous reviews across disciplines have explored various dimensions of the achievement gap among immigrant students. In education, Duong et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis focusing on generational differences in academic achievement, identifying small but significant advantages for second-generation students over their first-generation and native peers under certain conditions. Similarly, Andon et al. (2014) analyzed the immigrant-native gap across content areas, noting significant disparities in mathematics, science, and reading performance.

Volante et al. (2019) explored the enduring achievement gap by analyzing the factors that impact the performance of first- and second-generation immigrant students, alongside the policies and

practices linked to improved educational outcomes. The study proposed a multi-layered framework to help policymakers juxtapose the key characteristics of their immigrant students' achievement their individual, family, school, community, and host society characteristics and policies.

In sociology Schulz (2013) provided a broader perspective on how social relations and contexts influence educational outcomes, linking the achievement gap to social capital and structural integration. Recent research by Alieva et al. (2024) examined academic performance gaps between native and immigrant students in Europe and English-speaking countries using data from PIRLS, TIMSS, and PISA. They found no significant gap in English-speaking countries, but a large gap in Europe, particularly in primary school, even after accounting for socioeconomic factors. While the gap narrows in secondary education, it often persists, especially in systems with early tracking, emphasizing the role of socioeconomic disparities in shaping immigrant students' academic trajectories.

In the Italian context, Di Bartolomeo (2011) investigated the roles of economic resources, cultural capital, aspirations, and ethnic school segregation in shaping the educational outcomes of second-generation immigrants. This research revealed that socioeconomic background and ethnic segregation are among the most significant barriers to academic success. Moreover, the independent effect of second-generation status on performance suggests that cultural and systemic factors also play a critical role.

Azzolini (2012) extended the analysis of immigrant student achievement in Italy, revealing pronounced disadvantages across all educational levels. The findings of this review emphasized the generational differences, with second-generation students generally outperforming their first-generation peers but still lagging behind native students. Notably, Azzolini highlighted the heterogeneity of outcomes among different national-origin groups. For instance, Northern and sub-Saharan African students faced severe disadvantages, while Eastern Asian students exhibited significant generational gains. These findings underscore the importance of disaggregating data by national origin to tailor interventions effectively.

Research in psychology has identified stereotype threat as a critical factor influencing the performance of immigrant students. According to Appel et al. (2015), stereotype threat, a situational predicament where individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group, can significantly impair students' academic performance. Their meta-analysis of 19 experiments

underscored the robust impact of stereotype threat on the achievement gap. The study also highlighted the role of moderators such as cultural context, age, and the strength of ethnic identity, suggesting that interventions to mitigate stereotype threat must be context-specific and culturally sensitive.

Phalet and Baysu (2020) reviewed the achievement gap among immigrant students by focusing on minority acculturation experiences within intergroup contexts. They highlight the mixed findings in Europe regarding the adaptive advantages of integration orientation, referring to balancing both cultures, for minority youth. Shifting from individual acculturation differences, the review emphasized how intergroup contact, ideologies, and shared acculturation norms shape academic outcomes. Their findings suggested that fostering positive intergroup relations in schools can help narrow the achievement gap.

However, a significant limitation in the current literature is that not all reviews focus exclusively on the achievement gap among immigrant students, and many predominantly rely on quantitative studies. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative research, this review aims to provide a deeper understanding of the achievement gap, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of this project. Moreover, it is essential to extend the literature by providing a comprehensive overview of all contributing factors. This narrative review aims to synthesize the existing studies into macro areas of factors to better understand the multifaceted nature of the achievement gap. By categorizing the determinants in this manner, we can gain deeper insights into how various elements interact and contribute to the academic disparities observed among immigrant students. Additionally, a significant gap in the current literature is that not all reviews focus exclusively on the achievement gap among immigrant students, which this review seeks to address.

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Research Question

Considering what was presented in the previous section, this narrative literature review aims to find the answers to the following research questions:

The main research question is: **What are the factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries?**

To address the overarching question, the review explored several specific aspects. The review examined existing studies to identify the various influences on academic performance, track choice, and attainment of immigrant students. Specifically, the study aimed to uncover how various factors such as socio-economic conditions, cultural context, individual characteristics, and broader community and environmental factors might shape these educational outcomes.

The review adopted an exploratory approach, synthesizing findings across disciplines to develop a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of the achievement gap. By categorizing the factors based on recurring themes and patterns identified in the literature, the review sought to contribute to the insight into the multifaceted nature of the disparities between native and immigrant students in Western countries and to highlight areas for future research and policy development.

3.1.2 Procedures and Search Strategies

In order to have as complete a view of the literature as possible, it was decided to carry out a narrative review, but we tried to approach the systematic review method as closely as possible. According to Grant (2009), this type of review can be referred to as a systematized review. However, this review is not considered a systematic review due to the absence of a formal quality assessment of the included studies. The decision not to conduct a formal quality evaluation was influenced by several considerations. Given the high number of studies identified, spanning multiple disciplines and cultural contexts, applying a uniform assessment framework was neither practical nor feasible. Additionally, the inclusion of diverse research designs, ranging from qualitative to quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, highlighted the heterogeneity of the dataset, which posed challenges for applying standardized quality criteria. Moreover, many of the studies considered were conducted in different time periods, with older studies sometimes lacking the level of methodological transparency required for contemporary quality assessments.

Furthermore, a meta-analysis was not conducted due to the heterogeneity of the studies in terms of design, study populations, exposure, and outcome measures. The wide variation in these factors prevented the statistical pooling of data, which is a key characteristic of meta-analytic approaches. These factors reflect the complexity and wide range of the existing literature on the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. Rather than excluding studies based on varying methodological or contextual standards, this review emphasizes inclusivity, aiming to

synthesize findings across diverse perspectives. Additionally, although multiple reviewers participated in screening the abstracts to enhance reliability and reduce bias, the absence of a systematic quality assessment differentiates this narrative review from a systematic review. By adopting this approach, the review enables a broader and more flexible exploration of the multifaceted factors contributing to disparities in academic performance, track choice, and attainment among immigrant students in Western countries.

This review contributes to the literature by examining the achievement gap in terms of performance, track choice, and attainment among children and adolescents with an immigrant background, compared to their native counterparts in Western countries. By addressing these dimensions, the review provides a comprehensive understanding of the disparities faced by immigrant students.

We used three databases for the search: PsycInfo, Scopus, and ERIC. The following string was entered in each of the databases. The research was conducted in different databases due to the interdisciplinary nature of the study; PsychInfo for Psychology, ERIC for Education, and Scopus as an interdisciplinary database. After the keywords and the final version of the string for topics such as “school delay”, “school choice”, “academic gap” and the target population (immigrants and thesaurus) were defined. To ensure a thorough exploration of the literature, we conducted research using carefully selected keywords across the three databases. The final string of keywords was as follows:

Figure 3.1 *String entered in the databases*

(“School choice”, OR “course choice”, OR “subject choice”, OR “course access”, OR “track choice”, OR “school tracks”, OR “achievement gap”, OR “educational gap”, OR “educational inequality”, OR “academic underperformance”, OR “school achievement”, OR “education transitions”, OR “adjustment outcomes”, OR “Achievement inequality”), AND (“immigrant”, OR “immigration”, OR “migrants”, OR “migration”)

The search in PsycINFO, Scopus, and ERIC was done in February 2022. The search was limited to title and abstract. A chart with 1149 abstracts was prepared. The data was homogenized and dissertations, presentation in congresses books, and duplicated documents were removed. The

screening for abstracts was carried out. 389 records were classified. Independent researchers proceeded with screening the titles and abstracts, including in the next step only the articles for which titles and abstracts were considered pertinent by the independent researchers. From this number, 26 articles are associated with the intervention and good practices (See Chapter 6) and 229 items were associated with the factors contributing Educational Gap, included in the present review. The records were categorized by methodology by the reviewers. Next, the full-text screening was conducted for these records by two independent researchers. After screening the abstracts, 44 qualitative studies underwent full-text screening, resulting in the inclusion and analysis of 12 articles. Of 185 articles with quantitative research methods, 105 were included in this review. Studies included in this review adhered to the following criteria:

- Primary indicators of the achievement gap, including a) academic performance, b) educational track choice, and c) educational attainment as measured by academic outcomes of the study.

- Focus on factors addressing the achievement gap between native students and students with migrant backgrounds, both first and second-generation, aged between 5-18. Studies related to elementary, lower secondary school and higher secondary school students were included. Studies related to kindergarten were included only if they encompassed additional school levels.

- Studies about immigrant students up to the third generation were included. Studies focusing on ethnic and racial groups were excluded.

- Published studies utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

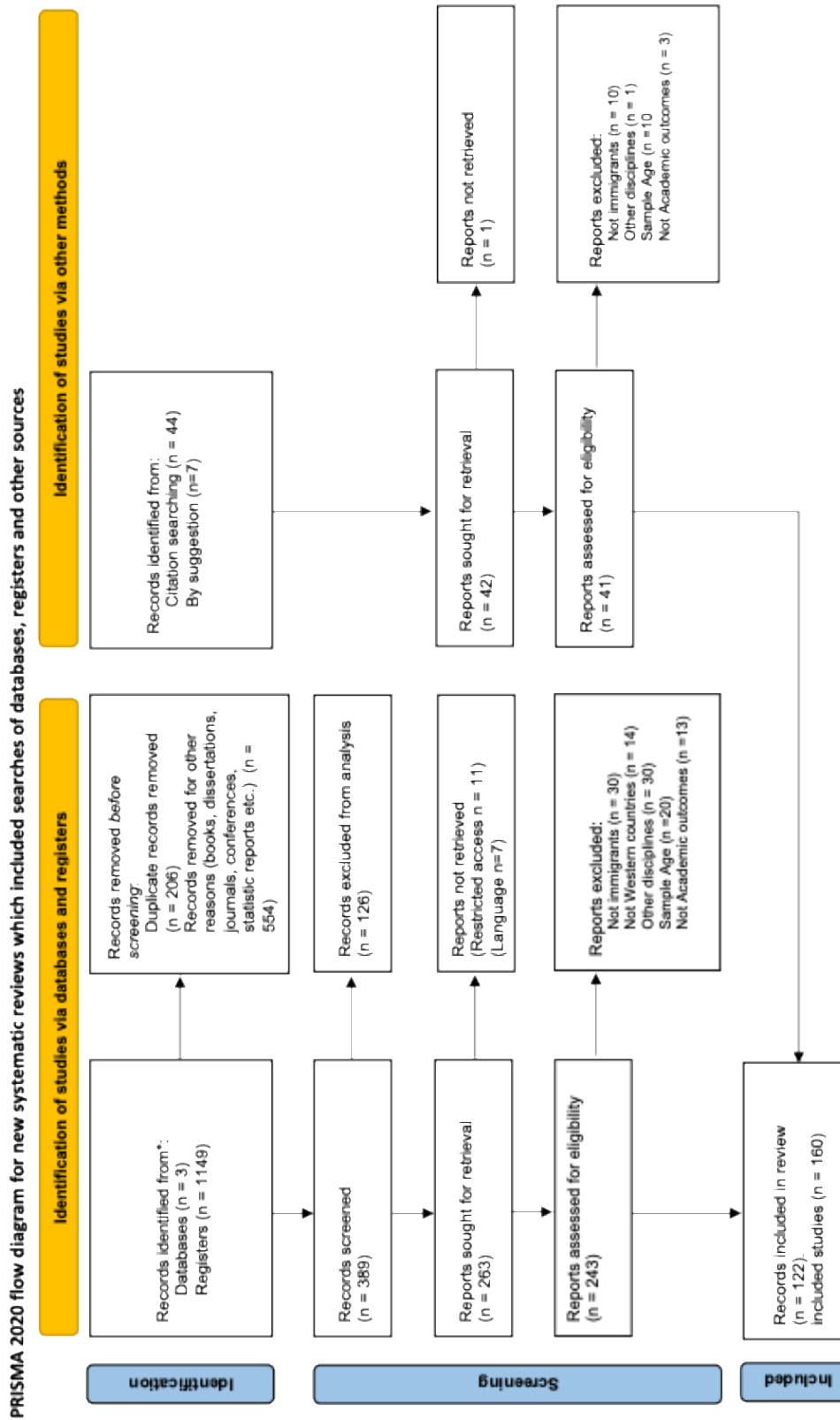
- Studies conducted in Western countries, including European countries that included Russia and Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. All the studies conducted in Australia, Asia, and Africa were excluded.

- Papers published in English or Italian.

It is also important to note that we did not activate the snowballing search method for this review, which means that we did not systematically follow up on references cited in the initially identified studies. However, snowballing was applied in the review of interventions (Chapter 6), due to the limited number of intervention studies available. This method was used to capture additional relevant studies and perspectives within that specific context.

The final pool for this review consisted of 117 articles, including 132 studies. Out of these numbers, 14 studies were qualitative and 118 were quantitative. The PRISMA flowchart summarizing the screening process (Moher et al., 2009) is displayed in Figure 3-2.

Figure 3.2 PRISMA flowchart summarizing the screening process and records included in the



*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).
 **If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. For more information, visit: <http://www.prisma-statement.org>

3.1.3 Data Extraction, Synthesis, and Categorization

Data from studies meeting the inclusion criteria were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. In this phase, we systematically reviewed each study to identify the factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students. Key descriptive characteristics such as the study's design, sample size, and geographical context were recorded. We also noted the factors studied within each paper, ensuring that all relevant factors were captured. The studies were categorized according to their characteristics and predictor factors, and their findings were narratively synthesized. To structure the synthesis, the studies were analyzed in relation to six macro-categories of factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students. This categorization was based on an analysis of the studies' content, distinguishing between the analysis of qualitative and quantitative studies. Qualitative studies were analyzed by identifying themes in their findings and considering the qualitative methods used. For quantitative studies, we extracted relevant insights about the factors influencing academic disparities and their statistical significance.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 General Characteristics of the Studies

Out of the 132 studies included, the vast majority were conducted in the United States ($n = 44$), followed by Germany ($n = 19$). Additionally, ($n = 14$) studies were carried out in more than one country. Moreover, ($n = 14$) studies were conducted in the Netherlands, ($n = 5$) in Italy, and Belgium ($n = 4$) in the UK ($n = 4$), Sweden ($n = 6$), and Spain and Portugal. ($n = 3$) studies were conducted. France, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, and Luxembourg had ($n = 2$) studies each. Canada, Norway, Russia, Western European countries, Israel, and Bulgaria each had ($n = 1$) study.

The studies included many diverse ethnicities, such as African Americans ($n = 14$), Latinos (e.g., Hispanic, Spanish speakers, Mexicans, Chicanos, Cubans, Nicaraguans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Puerto Ricans) ($n = 37$), Asians (e.g., Asian Americans, Koreans, Filipinos, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Thai) ($n = 27$), Arabs and North Africans (e.g.,

Moroccans, Tunisians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Yemenis, Berbers, Algerians, Maghrebi, Somalians, Ethiopians) ($n = 20$), Turkish ($n = 17$), European Mediterranean (e.g., Mediterranean countries including the Balkans, Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Romania/Roma, Eastern Europeans, Poland, Estonia, Yugoslavia, EU25, European countries not members of the EU) ($n = 19$), Africans/Blacks (e.g., African Americans/Blacks, Afro-Caribbeans, Lusophones, Portuguese Blacks) ($n = 15$), and South and South-East Asians (e.g., Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Iraqis, Indians, Kurds, Syrians, Afghans, Punjabis) ($n = 11$). Some studies involved various ethnic groups as the sample ($n = 5$). Some studies sampled immigrants from Western countries such as Canadians Western Europeans in Catalonia, Dutch from the Netherlands in Flanders, Finnish in Sweden, as well as Surinamese/Antillean, Swedish in Finland) ($n = 5$) studies sampled Russian immigrants from Former Soviet Union (FSU) countries, Tatars, Caucasians/CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). In ($n = 3$) studies, the participants were Cambodian Americans, Vietnamese, Laotian/Montegard, and ($n = 3$) Pacific Islanders. Irish and Scandinavian, UK in Southern Ireland ($n = 2$). Ultimately, ($n = 1$) study sampled “Children immigrated from less developed countries” without specifying the country of origin of migrant participants. Finally, ($n = 25$) studies did not specify the origin of the sample.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of the studies

Citation	Type of study	Host country	immigrant group origin	School level	sample size	Type of academic outcome	Longitudinal
(Baker, 2017)	QL	US	Various countries-(Spanish speakers) - Punjabi-Amharic)	Middle school	5	Performance Tracking	NO
(Beach et al., 2013)	QL	Sweden	Not specified	High school	200	Performance	NO
(Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj , 2014)	QL	US	Various Countries [(Hispanics) Dominican, Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Colombian; (Asians) Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani]	Middle school	765	Tracking	NO
(Chuhunon et al., 2010)	QL	US	Cambodian American	High school	10	Performance	NO
(Cone et al., 2014)	QL	US	Hispanic, Black (predominantly Haitian students), and Asian/Native American	Middle school	36	Performance	NO
(Goodwin & Stanton, 2022)	QL	US	American teacher with students from Dominican Republic, Ecuador & Yemen	Middle school & Highschool	19	Performance	NO
(Haxton, 2011)	QL	US	Black, White Asian Latino, and 1 Other race	Middle school	84	Tracking	NO
(Perez-Izaguirre, 2019)	QL	Spain	Various countries(Roma, Bolivian, Colombian, Peruvian, Nicaraguan, Bulgarian, Portugues,Ukrainian,Ecuadorean)	High school	66	Performance	NO
(Reyes & Carrasco, 2018)	QL	Spain	Pakistani, Bangladeshi	Middle school & Highschool	53	Tracking	NO
(Säävälä et al., 2017)	QL	Finland	Various Countries [Kurdish, Russian and Somali speakers, Filipino, Polish, Turkish]	Elementary & Middle school	128	Performance	NO
(Seghers et al., 2021)	QL	Belgium	Various countries	Elementary	30	Tracking	NO
(Seghers et al., 2019)	QL	Belgium	Turkish, Lebanese, Polish	Elementary	32	Tracking	YES

(Vakalahi, 2009)	QL	US	Pacific Islander American	High school	23	Performance Attainment	NO
(Andriessen et al., 2006)	QN	Netherlands	Turkish, Moroccan	High school	508	Performance	NO
(António & Monteiro, 2015a)	QN	Portugal	Portuguese Black students second generation	High school	140	Performance	NO
(António & Monteiro, 2015b)	QN	Portugal	Portuguese Black students second generatin	High school	62	Performance	NO
(Areepattamannil, 2012).	QN	Canada, India	Indian	High school	718	Performance	NO
Arikan et al., 2020)	QN	Belgium, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden	Various countries	Elementary	44671	Performance	NO
(Azzolini et al., 2012).	QN	Italy & Spain	Not specified	High school	Not specified	Performance	NO
(Bailey et al., 2008)	QN	US	Latino (middle-income Mexican- and Central American–heritage families)	Elementary	20	Performance	NO
(Barban & White, 2011)	QN	Italy	six largest communities present in the sample: Italy, Albania, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Tunisia, Macedonia, and China	Middle school	17658	Performance Tracking	YES
(Baysu & Phalet, 2012)	QN	Belgium	Turkish	Middle school & High school	661	Tracking Attainment	NO

(Becker & Klein, 2021).	QN	Germany	Turkish	Elementary & Middle school	909	Tracking	YES
(Birkelund, 2020)	QN	Denmark	Various countries	Middle school	137,605	Performance Tracking	YES
(Borgna & Contini, 2014)	QN	Western European countries	Not specified	High school	Not specified	Performance	NO
(Botezat, 2011)	QN	Germany	Not specified	High school	4040	Performance	NO
(Brinbaum & Lutz, 2017)	QN	US & France	in France: North Africans (Maghreb) in US: Mexicans (e.g., Mexicans)	Middle school	Not specified	Attainment	YES
(Cahan et al., 2001)	QN	Israel	Eastern (Asian, African) / Western (American, European, etc.)	Middle school	45,000	Performance	YES
(Celeste et al., 2019)	QN	Belgium	Moroccan, Turkish & European backgrounds (mainly southern EU); western EU, other regions	High school	3131	Performance	YES
(Colding, 2009)	QN	Denmark	Children of immigrants from less- developed countries, 1st and 2nd generation	Middle school	35776	Attainment	NO
(Combet & Oesch, 2021)	QN	Switzerland	Not specified	High school	2,821	Attainment	YES
(Demie, 2018)	QN	UK	Various countries	Elementary	56,864	Performance	NO
(Demie, 2019)	QN	UK	Easter European	Elementary	586,181	Performance Attainment	NO
(Di Bartolomeo, 2011)	QN	Italy	Not specified	Middle school	30,095	Performance	NO
(Dimitrova et al., 2018)	QN	Bulgaria	Roma	High school	202	Performance	NO
(Dollmann, 2016)	QN	Germany	Turkish	Elementary	1359	Tracking	YES
(Dornbusch et al., 1987)	QN	US	Various countries	High school	1281	Performance	YES
(Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011)	QN	France	Southern European community (essentially Portuguese, Spanish and Italian), Northern African community (Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian migrants), Asian and Turkish	Middle school	14022	Performance Attainment	NO

(Drake, 2014)	QN	US	Black, Asian, Hispanic, South west Asian, Pacific islander (Language minority) Migrants and race/ethnicity	High school	15,509	Performance	NO
(Driessen, 2001)		Netherlands	Surinamese, Turkish, and Moroccan.		1128	Performance	NO
(Dronkers et al., 2012)	QN	15 western destination countries.	Various countries	High school	8581	Performance	NO
(Duong et al., 2014)	QN	US	Vietnamese American and Mexican American	Middle school	730	Performance	NO
(Entorf & Lauk, 2008)	QN	32 countries	Various countries	High school	250,000	Performance	NO
(Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017).	QN	US	Various countries	High school	20,774	Attainment	YES
(Figlio et al., 2017)	QN	US	Various countries	High school	Not specified	Performance Attainment Tracking	YES
(Froehlich et al., 2022a) [Martiny et al., 2014a (published)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	148	Performance	NO
(Froehlich et al., 2022b) [Mok et al., 2014(Unpublished)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	200	Performance	NO
(Froehlich et al., 2022c) [Martiny et al., 2014b(Unpublished)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	179	Performance	NO
(Froehlich et al., 2022d) [Froehlich et al., 2016a(published)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	174	Performance	NO
(Froehlich et al., 2022e) [Froehlich et al., 2016a (Published)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	186	Performance	NO
(Froehlich et al., 2022f) [Mok et al., 2017(Published)]		Germany	Turkish	High school	94	Performance	NO
(Gijsberts & Van der Ploeg, 2016)	QN	Netherlands	Turkish, Moroccan, Suriname or the Netherlands Antilles; the majority originate from other countries in Asia, Africa, Southern or Western Europe.	Elementary	around 60000	Performance	YES
(Glock et al., 2013a)	QN	Luxembourgish	Not specified	Elementary	54	Tracking	NO

(Glock et al., 2013b)	QN	Luxembourgish	Not specified	Elementary	60	Tracking	NO
(Govaris et al., 2021)	QN	Greece	Not specified	High school	1303	Performance	NO
(Guerra et al., 2019)	QN	Portugal	Not specified	Elementary	593	Performance	NO
(Hou & Zhang, 2015)	QN	Canada, India	Various countries	High school	Not specified	Performance Attainment	YES
(Helms-Lorenz & Jacobse, 2008)	QN	Netherlands	Morocco, another African country, Suriname, an Asian country, Afghanistan, Iraq, others with unknown country of birth	Elementary	103	Performance	NO
(Huang, 2000)	QN	United States, Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand (English-speaking countries)	Asians and Hispanics in U.S)	Elementary	45996	Performance	NO
(Jia, 2019)	QN	US	Asian, European-descent (white), African-descent (black), and Hispanic.	High school	11720	Performance	YES
(Johnson, 2019)	QN	US	Mostly Chinese and Spanish speaking	High school	41,343	Tracking Attainment	YES
(Jutengren & Medin, 2019)	QN	Sweden	Various (50 countries out of Scandinavia)	Elementary	201	Performance	YES
(Kihara, 2022)	QN	US	Hispanic, Black, Asian	Kindergarten to High school	26879	Performance	YES
(Kiang, et al., 2013)	QN	US	Asian -American (Cambodian and Chinese) South Asian (Indian, Pakistani), Chinese , and pan-ethnic (i.e., Asian). Montagnard, Laotian, Vietnamese, Filipino/a, Japanese, Korean, and Thai	High school	151	Performance	YES

(Kim, 2018)	QN	US	Not specified	High school	3,627,353	Performance	NO
(Kiss, 2013)	QN	Germany	Not specified	Elementary & Middle school & High school	1701	Performance	NO
(Kuyvenhoven & Boterman, 2021)	QN	Netherlands	(Surinamese/Antillean), Moroccan/Turkish, Other non-western and Western migrant background	High school	2,218	Tracking	YES
(Lauermaun et al., 2020)	QN	Germany	Not specified	Middle school	1067	Performance	NO
(Ledwith & Reilly, 2013)	QN	Ireland	Irish UK Polish Lithuanian Other EU25 Rest of the world	Middle school	755	Performance Tracking	NO
(Ledwith & Reilly, 2014a)	QN	Southern Ireland	Africa, Asia European countries not included in the EU.	High school	749	Performance	NO
(Lee & Kim, 2020a)	QN	US	Koreans, Korean American natives, Korean immigrants, Americans	Middle school	11670	Performance	NO
(Lee et al., 2017)	QN	US	Latinos	High school	2,012	Performance	NO
(Lee et al., 2018)	QN	US	Not specified	High school	4286	Performance	NO
(Lenkeit et al., 2015)	QN	UK	Pakistani and Bangladeshi	High school	4,315	Attainment	NO
(Lenkeit et al., 2018)	QN	UK	Pakistani/Bangladeshi	High school	4315	Performance Attainment	YES
(Li & Yang, 2015)	QN	US	Asian	Elementary	264	Performance	YES
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988a)	QN	Sweden	Mexican American immigrants	Elementary	32	Performance	NO
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988b)	QN	Sweden	Latinos	Elementary	319	Performance	NO
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988c)	QN	Sweden	Finish	Elementary	319	Performance	NO
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988d)	QN	Sweden	Finnish	Middle school	388	Performance	NO
(Lorenz et al., 2020)	QN	Germany	Turkish & Eastern European (countries from the area of the former Soviet Union and Poland)	High school	1,992	Attainment	YES
(Mantovani et al., 2018)	QN	Italy	Majorly Northern Europeans (Romania)	High school	5600	Performance	NO
(Marx et al., 2021)	QN	Germany	Various countries (33 countries) majorly Syria, Bulgaria, Poland	Middle school	653	Performance	YES

(Meunier, 2011)	QN	Switzerland	Not specified	High school	7790	Performance	NO
(Minello & Barban, 2012)	QN	Italy	Various (From ninety-two different countries)	Middle school	20,528	Tracking	NO
(Miyamoto et al., 2020)	QN	Germany	Turkey, Poland and other FSU countries (3.5th generation)	High school	13,735	Performance	YES
(Moon et al., 2009)	QN	US	American Korean, Mexican American	Elementary	203	Performance	NO
(Motti-Stefanidi, 2012)	QN	Greece	Albanians	Middle school	1,057	Performance	YES
(Nagy et al., 2019)	QN	Germany	Not specified	High school	33,480	Performance	NO
(Obinna & Ohanian, 2020)	QN	US	Hispanic/Latino	High school	2,522	Attainment	YES
(Owens & Lynch, 2012)	QN	US	Black, Hispanic	College	1,865	Performance	YES
(Paat, 2015)	QN	US	Mexican (1st & 2nd generation)	Middle school & Highschool	5,262	Performance Attainment	YES
(Park et al., 2012)	QN	US	Hispanic	High school	367	Performance	NO
(Patel et al., 2016)	QN	US	Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean (61 countries)	High school	147	Performance	NO
(Pivovarov & Powers, 2019).	QN	US	Not specified	High school	681	Performance	NO
(Pomianowicz, 2021)	QN	28 Western countries (PISA)	second generation students born in 28 Western countries	High school	124,712	Performance	NO
(Pong & Hao, 2007)	QN	US	non-Hispanic Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Chinese, and Filipinos	High school	9,351	Performance	YES
(Pong et al., 2007)	QN	US	Hispanic and Asian (both 1st, 2nd & 3rd generation - reference: white)	High school	17,996	Performance	NO
(Portes, 1999)	QN	US	Various countries	Middle school & High school	5,267	Performance	NO
(Potochnick, 2018)	QN	US	Hispanics, Mexican, Chinese, other Asian, another ethnic group	High school	15,890	Performance	YES
(Razfar & Simon, 2011a)	QN	US	Latinos	College	80,923	Performance	YES
(Ream, 2003a)	QN	US	Mexican American immigrants	High school	12,048	Performance	YES

(Roche & Kuperminc, 2012)	QN	US	Mexican American, and other Latino students	Middle school	199	Performance	NO
(Rodriguez, 2002)	QN	US	Majorly African Americans, Hispanic (e.g., Cuba, Nicaraguan)	High school	2,500	Performance	YES
(Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016)	QN	data from 12 countries	Not specified	Middle school	Not specified	Performance	YES
(Schachner et al., 2021)	QN	Germany	Majorly Turkey, Lebanon, Poland	High school	1,335,	Performance	NO
(Schubert & Becker, 2010)	QN	Germany	Not specified	Elementary & Middle school	4,658	Performance Tracking	YES
(Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006)	QN	US	Black Hispanic White, Asian and other	Elementary & Middle school	122436	Performance	YES
(Seghers et al., 2019)	QN	Belgium	Not specified	Elementary	1907	Tracking	YES
(Shapira, 2012)	QN	18 OECD countries	Not specified	High school	Not specified	Performance	NO
(Song, 2011)	QN	Austria, Germany Switzerland	Turkish.	Middle school	18114	Performance	NO
(Šori et al., 2011)	QN	Yugoslavia: Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. And Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland and Norway.	Not specified	High school	Not specified	Performance	NO
(Spees et al., 2016)	QN	US	Black, Asian, and Latino	Middle school	808840	Performance	YES
(Tjaden, 2017)	QN	Germany	Majorly Turkish origin and from former Soviet Union countries	Middle school	6247	Tracking	YES

(Tovar-García, 2017).	QN	Republic of Tatarstan, Russia	Ex-Soviet countries, ethnic Russians (RUSSIANMIGRANT), ethnic Tatars (TATAR-MIGRANT), ethnic Caucasians (CAUCASIAN-MIGRANT), and ethnic Asians (ASIAN-MIGRANT).	Middle school	2,003	Performance	NO
(Tovar-García, 2017).	QN	Russia	Tatar, Caucasian, or Asian migrants.	Elementary & Middle school	6000	Performance	YES
(Tseng, 2006)	QN	US	Asian, Pacific, Latino/American, Afro-Caribbean, European	College	789	Tracking	NO
(Tuppat et al., 2016)	QN	Germany	Turkish, Mediterranean (European Mediterranean countries incl. the Balkans), CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and any other	Elementary	50717	Tracking	YES
(Turjanmaa& Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020)	QN	Finland	Sweden, Russia or Former Soviet Union, Estonia, other European country, Somalia, Iraq, China, Thailand, other	High school	2657	Performance	NO
(Ulriksen et al., 2015)	QN	Norway	Not specified	High school	8,574	Performance Attainment	NO
(Van den Bergh et al., 2010)	QN	Netherlands	Turkish, Moroccan	Elementary	475	Performance	NO
(van Welie et al., 2013)	QN	Netherlands	Surinamese/Antillean; Turkish; Moroccan; combined group of all other	Elementary & Middle school	16,071	Tracking	YES
(Vanlaar et al., 2014)	QN	Belgium	Not specified	Elementary	4,344	Performance	NO
(Vaquera & Kao, 2012)	QN	Spain	West Europe, Canada, US; Eastern Europe; Africa; Asia; Latin America	High school	5420	Performance	YES
(Verhaeghe et al., 2018)	QN	Belgium	Turkish or Kurdish, Arab or Berber, other.	Kindergarten & Elementary	6302	Performance	YES
(Wang & Sakamoto, 2021)	QN	US	Hispanic Americans	Middle school	8,984	Attainment	YES
(Warren, 1996)	QN	US	Mexican immigrants (born in Mexico) Chicanos, (born in the United States and identify themselves Mexican ancestry), Whites	High school	22618	Attainment	NO

(Weber et al., 2015a)	QN	Austria	Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkey, and Kosovo	Middle school	132	Performance	NO
(Weber et al., 2015b)	QN	Austria	Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Turkey, and Egypt	Middle school	152	Performance	NO
(Zhang et al., 2022)	QN	US	Asians: Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos, (also, Vietnamese; Laotian; Cambodian). Latino: from Mexico and Central America (also Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Honduran)	Middle school & High school	1522	Performance	YES

Note: Column 2 indicates the QL = qualitative or QN = quantitative research methodology, Column3 the country of data collection, column 4 the immigrant group nationality, column 6 the total sample size and Column7 the type of academic outcome (Performance/Track choice/Attainment).

In terms of sample type, out of the included studies, the vast majority focused exclusively on students ($n = 73$). Six studies sampled both students and their parents ($n = 6$). Four studies included students, parents, and teachers ($n = 4$), while three studies involved students and teachers ($n = 4$). One study sampled parents and teachers together ($n = 1$). Another study included students, parents, and school personnel ($n = 1$). Two studies focused solely on parents ($n = 3$), whereas one study involved students, parents, and counselors ($n = 1$). There was also one study that sampled students, adults, and parents ($n = 1$). Lastly, two studies included both students and adults ($n = 2$).

Out of the included studies, a total of 16 studies examined more than one academic outcome, such as performance and attainment, performance and tracking, or tracking and attainment ($n = 16$). The majority of studies focused exclusively on performance ($n = 91$). Sixteen studies centered on tracking ($n = 16$), while nine studies were dedicated to attainment ($n = 9$). Seven studies investigated both performance and attainment ($n = 7$). Five studies analyzed performance and tracking ($n = 5$), and three studies examined tracking and attainment ($n = 3$). Finally, one study included all three outcomes: performance, attainment, and tracking ($n = 1$).

The studies covered a range of school levels. Specifically, ($n = 23$) studies focused on elementary school, ($n = 27$) studies focused on middle school, and studies focused on high school were ($n = 61$). Four studies addressed college-level students ($n = 4$). There were also studies that covered multiple school levels: six studies examined both middle school and high school ($n = 6$), one study focused on both kindergarten and elementary school ($n = 1$), one study spanned from kindergarten to high school ($n = 1$), one study included elementary, middle, and high school levels ($n = 1$), and six studies covered both elementary and middle school levels ($n = 6$). Additionally, 15 studies encompassed more than one school level, such as combinations of kindergarten to high school, middle school and high school, and elementary and middle school ($n = 15$).

In this review, a significant number of studies employed a longitudinal design, with 48 studies tracking participants over multiple time points or cohorts ($n = 47$).

The quantitative research methodologies employed in this review primarily consisted of correlational studies, which form the largest group with a total of $n = 107$ studies. These studies are essential for identifying associations between educational outcomes and the factors influencing immigrant students' achievement gaps. By analyzing existing data, these studies provide insights

into potential predictors without manipulating the study environment. Additionally, the review included a smaller number of studies using experimental designs, totaling ($n = 8$). These studies comprised the manipulation of variables to establish causal relationships between various factors and student outcomes. Ultimately, although limited in number ($n = 3$) studies, ($n = 2$) were quasi-experimental. These studies typically involve non-randomized groups, offering useful insights that are somewhat controlled yet still generalizable to more typical educational settings.

Table 3.2 Factor Categories

Macro-category	Category	Frequency
Socio-economic factors	Family income	25
	Family structure	31
	Migrant background	31
	Parental educational level	59
	Parental occupation	29
	Poverty and socio-economic risk	10
	Socio-economic status	21
	Other socio-economic factors related to the family	19
Socio-cultural factors	Cultural values	8
	Family cultural, educational, and technological resources	23
	Family environment	7
Relational factors	Parent-child relationship	6
	Parental expectations, encouragement and involvement	15
	Peer characteristics and social context	13
	Peers relationships	13
	School-parents relationship	7
	Social support	6
	Teacher-student relationship	6
	Teacher's beliefs and attitudes	5
Teacher's bias	4	
Psychological and behavioral factors	Academic aspirations and attitudes	16
	Acculturation process	9
	Cognitive abilities	13
	Cultural and ethnic identity development	9
	Psychological wellbeing	4
	Self-concept	6
	Stereotypes and stereotype threat	10
Student's characteristics	Demographics	60
	Educational background and prior academic success	22
	Educational experience	2
	Ethnic background	64

Macro-category	Category	Frequency
	Health and physical condition	2
	Language of instruction proficiency and progression	22
	Migrant student language background	31
	Migration history and educational journey	21
	School engagement, motivation, and behavior	21
	School mobility and age of starting	20
	Student's school pathways and curriculum	18
	Use of technology	2
	Other factors related to migration	9
	Language policy and bilingual education context	3
	Residential environment and neighborhood characteristics	14
	School climate and cultural policies	9
	School diversity and socioeconomic context	22
	School enrollment policies and programs	9
Community and environment	School policy and educational tracking	9
	School quality and educational environment	20
	School resources and teaching quality	12
	School size and type	9
	school socio-spatial characteristics	12
	Socio-economic policy context and educational systems	4

3.2.2 Overview of the Studies

In the subsequent sections, we will delve into a detailed description of the studies based on factors contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. This analysis is structured around six macro-categories, further subdivided into 52 distinct categories of factors. These macro categories include socio-economic factors, socio-cultural influences, individual characteristics, relational dynamics, and community and environmental aspects. Each study was carefully reviewed and analyzed to identify relevant factors affecting academic disparities in the three main academic hard outcomes, academic performance, academic track choice, and academic attainment.

It's important to note that while some studies explore multiple factors within the same category, each factor was counted only once per study to maintain clarity and prevent statistical redundancy. This means that if a study examined multiple factors within the same category, we considered the factor only once, even if it appeared several times in the study. This method ensures that the emphasis remains on the presence of factor types across the literature rather than the frequency of their study within individual research articles.

Additionally, factors were counted regardless of whether they were the primary focus of the study or treated as control variables or mediators. This comprehensive approach ensures that the emphasis remains on the presence of factor types across the literature rather than the frequency of their study within individual research articles.

This structured approach allows us to present a clear, organized synthesis of the research, highlighting the primary areas of focus and identifying where gaps may exist in the current literature. The goal is to provide a robust framework for understanding how different categories of factors impact the educational trajectories of immigrant students.

3.3 Socio-economic Factors

Socio-economic status (SES) is a well-documented determinant of educational outcomes. These factors include parental education, occupation, family income, family structure, migrant status, and general socio-economic status, among others. However, in much of the existing literature, SES is often treated as a control variable or background factor rather than a central focus. This approach, while valuable for isolating other variables, can obscure the multifaceted role SES plays in shaping the academic trajectories of immigrant students. This section aims to disentangle SES's direct and

indirect effects, highlight its interactions with other factors, and underscore its relevance in understanding the achievement gap.

A significant portion of studies examining immigrant students' academic achievement include SES as a control variable in their models. These studies often prioritize other factors such as social support and language skills. For instance, Becker and Klein (2021) measured SES factors as background variables and found that the primary effects of ethnic origin substantially contribute to unequal transition rates to the Gymnasium. Their findings suggest that these effects can be traced back to early childhood, where German language skills at age three are highly predictive of ethnic inequalities in later school performance. Such evidence underscores the persistent influence of SES, even when it is treated as a background variable.

When studies do center SES as a primary profound impact becomes evident. For example, Kiang et al. (2013) explored the role of socioeconomic stress on academic adjustment among Asian American adolescents. They found that socioeconomic stress was associated with poor academic adjustment, measured through self-reported GPA, the importance of academic success, and educational aspirations. However, the study also highlighted a buffering effect: family obligation moderated the negative effects of socioeconomic stress, particularly during later high school years. This underscores how SES directly shapes academic outcomes while interacting with cultural and relational factors.

SES does not operate in isolation; it interacts with other variables, amplifying or mitigating their effects. For example, Lenkeit et al. (2015) analyzed the mediating role of family SES in the relationship between immigrant background and academic attainment among Pakistani and Bangladeshi high schoolers in the UK. This section reviews the impact of these factors on academic outcomes. Their findings illustrate how SES interacts with cultural and ethnic factors to influence academic outcomes. Similarly, Azzolini et al. (2012) utilized the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data to compare immigrant and native students in Italy and Spain. They found that both first- and second-generation immigrant students underperformed natives in both countries. Although socioeconomic background and language skills contributed to explaining achievement gaps, significant differences remained even after controlling these variables. The study revealed that while modeling socioeconomic background reduced the observed gaps similarly in both countries, language spoken at home was more strongly associated with achievement gaps in Italy.

Additionally, Ulriksen et al. (2015) examined the role of SES alongside social support in influencing school achievement among 10th graders in Norway. Their findings revealed that, while group differences in achievements exist, direct associations between SES and academic outcomes remain significant across groups.

Meunier (2011) provides further insights into how SES mediates achievement gaps. This study on Switzerland's PISA 2000 data revealed that lower socioeconomic characteristics explained nearly 90.0% of the achievement gap in reading between Swiss and second-generation immigrant students. Among first-generation immigrants, lower socioeconomic returns, such as limited access to higher-quality educational tracks, were particularly penalizing. These findings point to the cumulative disadvantages of SES and its intersections with immigrant status.

Moon et al. (2009) examined predictors of school achievement among two predominant groups of American immigrants, Koreans and Mexicans. The study identified SES as a significant predictor of academic outcomes, with family income, parent education, and length of stay in the United States showing varying impacts across the groups. For Korean students, acculturation and parenting style were critical, while for Mexican students, parent education and length of stay in the U.S. were more influential. This underscores the need for culturally tailored interventions to address SES-related disparities.

SES is a critical factor that influences academic outcomes both directly and through its interactions with other variables. While often treated as a background measure, its pervasive effects demand a more nuanced analysis. The tendency to treat SES as a background variable may lead to an underestimation of its role in the academic achievement gap.

3.4 Socio-Cultural Factors

The sociocultural factors comprise factors related to the student's cultural background that are closely associated with associated to the academic outcomes. Immigrant families often face economic disadvantages and have less access to cultural resources, which limits their opportunities to attend high-quality schools, leading to disadvantages in the labor market (Tubadji et al., 2017). Cultural capital, including factors such as student's reading behavior, the cultural-pedagogical level of upbringing, and familiarity with the educational system, largely explains the effects of parents' educational and occupational levels on their children's academic trajectories (Van der Velden, 1991). This category encompasses access to books, computers, internet, educational

materials, and participation in cultural activities. Studies have shown that students who have greater access to these resources tend to perform better academically, as they are provided with tools that enhance learning and engagement. For example, various studies analyzed the number of books and daily newspaper at home or whether there are more than 100 books at home, highlighting the importance of these resources (e.g., Botezat, 2011; Hou & Zhang, 2015; Schubert & Becker, 2010; Tovar-García, 2017).

A study of 4,040 high school students in Germany using PISA data showed that educational and cultural resources significantly impact the academic performance of immigrant students. These resources not only boost academic success directly but also help mitigate the negative effects of parents' low educational levels, a common challenge in immigrant families (Botezat, 2011). This evidence emphasizes the role of cultural resources as mediators in overcoming structural disadvantages.

Similarly, Driessen et al. (1999) found that family structural factors, such as book culture and parental educational support, influence student outcomes but add little explanatory power. They also showed that family financial resources, linguistic and educational resources, parental reading behavior, and educational resources within the family) do not mediate educational outcomes across different ethnic groups. Additionally, there are significant variations in how cultural capital impacts the educational outcomes of Dutch, Surinamese, Turkish, and Moroccan students, highlighting the complex interplay of cultural resources and ethnic backgrounds.

Some studies examined how access to educational technology at home relates to academic outcomes in immigrant students. They investigated factors like cognitive stimulation, family wealth, and the availability of educational resources and possessions at home (Arikan et al., 2020; Azzolini et al., 2012; Dronkers et al., 2012; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Kim, 2018; Potochnick, 2018). Additionally, some studies considered home possessions such as PCs, consoles, internet access, rooms, TVs, and smartphones (Lenkeit et al., 2015; Shapira, 2012).

Culture, defined as the learned knowledge, values, beliefs, and expectations that shape individuals' actions (Phelan et al., 1998), is passed from parents to children alongside human capital, income, and genetic traits (Bisin & Verdier, 2001). The reviewed literature includes factors related to cultural values, traditional cultures, and ethnocultural characteristics (e.g., Figlio et al., 2017; Hou & Zhang, 2015). Some studies focused on family cultural values or family obligation in terms of values and expectations regarding assistance and support to the family (Chhuon et al., 2010; Kiang,

et al., 2013). Ultimately, Figlio et al. (2017) in a study examined how parental Long-Term Orientation culture (LTO) affects immigrant students' educational attainment among educational attainment of immigrant students living in the US. They found that students from cultures valuing delayed gratification achieve higher test scores, have fewer absences and disciplinary issues, repeat grades less, and graduate at higher rates. They are also more likely to enroll in advanced courses, especially in science. The study highlights that parents from long-term oriented cultures help secure better educational opportunities, and having immigrant peers from similar linguistic backgrounds enhances these benefits.

Family cohesion and dynamics are crucial for child development, providing a buffer against stress (Masten et al., 1988). Supportive parenting—marked by warmth, proactive teaching, and positive involvement—enhances resilience and social-emotional skills, especially in high-stress situations (Pettit et al., 1997). A cohesive family environment improves children's emotional, physical, and educational well-being and reduces aggression and depression (Tolan et al., 1997).

Among the studies included in this review, Paat's (2015) study examined the impact of family cohesion on the educational outcomes of first- and second-generation Mexican middle and high school students. The study found that students from two-parent households achieved higher levels of education, compared to those from single-parent households. Additionally, residing in a two-parent household during late adolescence marginally reduced the aspiration-attainment gap. Family cohesion was positively associated with students' GPAs.

In sum, socio-cultural factors significantly shape the academic outcomes of immigrant students by influencing access to cultural and educational resources, shaping family dynamics, and embedding cultural values that affect learning behaviors and educational aspirations.

3.5 Relational Factors

The academic paths of immigrant youth are shaped not only by their individual efforts and traits but also by the social and educational environments they experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, the relationship with parents, peers, and teachers form part of the microsystem, includes the immediate environments with which a child interacts directly, such as family, teachers, and peer groups. It encompasses the relationships and interactions a child has with these immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1990; Berk, 2000). These categories are crucial as they shape the immediate contexts in which

students learn and develop. They include various aspects of social support, peer and teacher relationships, and parental involvement.

The literature underscores the impact of social capital and school interactions on youth academic outcomes (Perreira et al., 2006; Sarason et al., 1990; Goodenow, 1993; Pianta, 1999; Ryan et al., 1994). For newcomer immigrant youth, positive relationships with family, community, and school are crucial for well-being and academic performance (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). Disruptions such as prolonged separations during migration and family changes can destabilize academic focus. Supportive relationships with adults and mentors are essential for connecting home and school, though such opportunities are often limited (Rhodes, 2002; Green et al., 2008; Roffman et al., 2003). Case studies show that supportive relationships enhance academic performance, while lack of support is linked to lower achievement.

Social support reflects supportive, or perceived supportive, behaviors from individuals in our close or extended social networks (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). It has been found to influence adolescents' development and school achievement (Domagala-Zysk, 2006; Uchino et al., 1997). Increasing literature emphasizes the importance of considering various sources of social support in measuring academic achievement (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Rueger et al., 2009). Support from parents, friends, teachers, and classmates is particularly relevant for educational outcomes (Hughes et al., 2008).

Studies in this review examined social support through perceptions of relationships with family, friends, classmates, and teachers, as well as recognition and respect, including empathy and social esteem from peers and teachers (e.g., Baker, 2017; Tovar-García, 2017). Additionally, Govaris (2021) studied 1,303 Greek high school students and found that migrant students and those from low-education families receive less recognition from teachers and peers. The study showed that teacher recognition significantly impacts academic achievement and self-esteem, while higher peer recognition correlates with increased self-esteem.

Some studies analyzed the impact of friendship or intergroup friendship as well as peers' relations or perception of relationship with friends and classmates (e.g., Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Linde & Löfgren, 1988a; Vakalahi, 2009). One study explored the role of perception of peers and friends' support or interaction and collaboration within group of students (Perez-Izaguirre, 2019).

In a qualitative study, Baker (2017) explored the impact of perceived peer and social support on the success of immigrant middle school students in the U.S. The study focused on advanced course

enrollment and linguistic success, highlighting support in three areas: academic content, course selection, and motivation. Support came from family, peers, and school personnel, with instrumental and informational support prominent in academic areas, while emotional support was linked to motivation. The study also noted that persistence and individual grit are key to maximizing social support benefits.

Adverse social relations, like peer discrimination and a lack of supportive academic relationships, can reduce perceptions of school safety and lower educational expectations. These factors are important because perceived school safety and expectations significantly impact student engagement and academic performance (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Ripski & Gregory, 2009). In some studies, the effect of peer discrimination or the experienced bullying has been examined (Arikan et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2017 & 2018). The study by Lee et al. (2018) showed that the negative social environments in U.S. public schools affect immigrant adolescents' academic achievement. Their findings indicated that peer discrimination lowers achievement through mediators like perceived school safety and educational expectations, while structural factors, such as high dropout rates and large enrollments, also negatively impact outcomes.

Research also, highlights how the presence of non-academically oriented friends, such as those who drop out of school or have no college plans, and the absence of academic supporters can adversely affect academic achievement (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Lee, 2009; Lee & Lam, 2016). Moreover, these negative relational characteristics often lead to downward assimilation, where immigrant students may reject the value of education, either consciously or unconsciously, resulting in entrenchment in lower socioeconomic positions (Hao & Pong, 2008; Portes, 2007).

Among these studies some focused on academically less oriented peers or perceived academic attitudes of students' friend or peers dropped out and average educational expectations of friends (e.g., Lorenz et al., 2020; Vaquera & Kao, 2012). Chhuon et al. (2010) studied Cambodian students in the U.S. transitioning from high school to university, highlighting the importance of peers with similar socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds for motivation and support. These peers helped create a supportive environment as students navigated dual cultural contexts. Additionally, academically oriented peer groups in Honors/AP classes and special programs fostered resilience and countered negative stereotypes. The study also explored how peers and Americanization shaped adolescents' self-perceptions (Chhuon et al., 2010).

Teacher expectations and their impact on student performance have been studied since Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, which highlighted how expectations can reinforce social inequalities. Expectancy effects encompass both self-fulfilling prophecies and self-maintaining expectations. Self-fulfilling prophecies occur when a false belief about a situation prompts behaviors that make the belief come true (Merton, 1957). In contrast, self-maintaining expectations, known as the Golem effect, involve negative expectations based on actual differences that perpetuate low expectations, ultimately negatively affecting performance (Babad et al., 1982). While teacher expectations are generally accurate and their effects typically small, they can have a significant impact in specific contexts. Jussim and Harber's (2005) review of teacher expectancy effects highlighted that student membership in a stigmatized group is a key moderator of these effects, emphasizing the importance of understanding how teacher perceptions can influence student behavior in educational settings. Some studies included in this review analyzed the teacher's expectations (e.g., Van den Bergh et al., 2010). Other factors emerging in the literature were: teacher's beliefs and attitudes of the teacher, teaching attitude toward student's future (Chhuon et al., 2010; Goodwin & Stanton, 2022). Teachers' attitudes are found to impact student treatment in terms of judgment and grading, so that positive attitudes enhance students' self-confidence and academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

A crucial protective factor, extensively studied in research in developmental and educational psychology, is the quality of student–teacher relationships. Supportive relationships with teachers, as perceived by both teachers and students, reliably predict school adjustment and achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Buyse et al., 2009; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Hughes, et al., 2001; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Phelan et al., 1998; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007). From the student's perspective, positive relationships with teachers protect them against low performance by improving school belonging and motivation for schoolwork (Goodenow, 1993). In this review some studies highlighted how how teacher support fosters school belonging and counters structural inequities, which aligns with research on teaching practices designed to support students (e.g., Goodwin & Stanton, 2022; Razfar & Simon, 2020b). For example, Baysu and Phalet (2012) found that perceived teacher support, along with intergroup friendships, significantly increased school retention rates among both minority and nonminority students in Belgium and reduced the attainment gap between Turkish Belgian students and their peers.

Some studies have focused on teaching style, teacher authority, or interactions with students, as well as students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers (e.g., Perez-Izaguirre, 2019). Similarly, Ream's (2003) study examined formal public social capital, particularly teacher-student interactions within schools and community organizations, expanding on Putnam's (2000) work on social capital. While these interactions were positively associated with 12th-grade math and reading achievement among White adolescents, they unexpectedly had a negative effect on reading achievement for Mexican-origin youth.

Building on these findings, teacher expectations significantly impact student outcomes and can exacerbate ethnic disparities. Teachers may have different expectations for ethnic minority students due to biases (Stiefel et al., 2007). Research from Western Europe, the United States, and other regions shows that such differential expectations and prejudices contribute to achievement gaps (e.g., Archer & Francis, 2005; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Teachers' attitudes may favor non-stigmatized groups, leading to a widening achievement gap (McKown & Weinstein, 2002). Stereotypes linked to students' ethnic backgrounds can further influence teachers' judgments and behaviors (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kawakami et al., 2002).

Among the studies included in this review; some studies analyzed factors related to teacher's bias on academic achievement of immigrant students. For example, Glock et al. (2013a & b) in an experiment examined if teachers' tracking judgments are biased by the immigrant backgrounds of the students and how teachers' tracking judgments are affected by inconsistencies in students' academic profiles. The study showed less favorable judgments for track decision by teachers for students with immigrant backgrounds than of students without immigrant backgrounds. Also, students with inconsistent academic profiles were also judged less favorably than students with consistent profiles.

Other studies have explored teachers' implicit and explicit prejudiced attitudes (Van den Bergh et al., 2010), as well as discrimination from institutional agents and experiences with teachers or counselors (e.g., Lee et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Guerra et al., 2019). For example, Van den Bergh et al. (2010) found that implicit prejudiced attitudes significantly predict ethnic achievement gaps and teacher expectations, more so than explicit measures, highlighting the critical role of unconscious biases in shaping educational outcomes.

The role of parental involvement also significantly affects student success. Hill and Taylor (2004) found that parental monitoring and involvement in school help promote positive outcomes for

early adolescents. Such involvement signals to both students and teachers that education is valued, fostering a collaborative environment that can enhance academic performance. Additionally, parental engagement has been shown to mediate the relationship between authoritative parenting and academic achievement (Steinberg et al., 1992). Some studies examined parental involvement in children's schooling (Moon et al., 2009; Motti-Stefanidi, 2012; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020). For example, Obinna and Ohanian (2020) found that Latino students whose parents did not face language barriers while interacting with school administrators, were less likely to drop out. The study highlighted the importance of parental engagement in mitigating dropout risks. This study also noted the negative impact of school mobility on dropout rates but found immigrant status to be a non-significant predictor, underscoring the critical role of relational and structural factors in academic success.

Immigrant parents and their adolescent children, regardless of their education levels and economic resources, usually seem to have higher educational aspirations than their native peers (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1995, 1998). They recognize that a university degree offers economic and social advantages, enabling their children to compete in the labor market, achieve upward mobility, and gain greater prestige and status (Bowen, 1997). Some studies in the literature highlighted the effects of factors related to parental educational aspirations for their children (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Hou & Zhang, 2015; Vaquera & Kao, 2012).

Parental expectations are another key factor influencing academic achievement. Studies have examined this under various terms, such as parent-child expectations, parental university expectations, and parents' interest in their child's academic success (e.g., Lenkeit et al., 2015; Tjaden, 2017; Zhang et al., 2022).

Building upon the role of parents in children's academic achievement, our review includes studies that examine various aspects of the parent-child relationship. This includes factors such as parent-child communication and social interactions with parents. Among the studies, the research by Pong et al. (2005) investigated the moderating role of parenting styles and forms of social capital, such as parental involvement, intergenerational closure, and trust, in explaining school performance across ethnic and generational groups. While significant differences were found in parenting styles and social capital by race/ethnicity and generational status, the study concluded that family SES was the primary factor explaining the achievement gap, with parenting styles and social capital not moderating ethnic-generational differences in academic performance. Building on the role of

family dynamics in shaping academic outcomes, our review also delved into the impact of parent-teacher interactions and its aspects. Säävälä et al. (2017) further explored the complexities of information sharing between immigrant families and schools. They revealed that immigrant parents often face significant barriers due to language difficulties and lack of cultural capital. This disparity in communication highlights the broader challenges in home-school interactions, where immigrant families' structural disadvantages and the role of their children as information gatekeepers complicate effective collaboration.

3.6 Psychological and Behavioral Factors

Immigrant and ethnic minority children and youth are at greater risk of social exclusion, with research showing they often have lower well-being and academic achievement compared to their native peers (Dimitrova et al., 2016; Frankenberg et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2015; Umaña-Taylor, 2016). The migration-morbidity hypothesis, which posits that immigrants experience poorer psychological adjustment, provides a framework for understanding these gaps. This hypothesis was recently confirmed by a meta-analysis conducted by Dimitrova et al. (2016), which found that immigrant children and youth in Europe experience higher levels of internalizing issues (such as depressive symptoms), externalizing problems (like conduct issues at school), and academic difficulties (including lower school achievement). These disparities are attributed to a range of factors, from individual variables such as gender and socioeconomic status to broader contextual elements, including national policies and societal attitudes towards immigrants. Social psychological research has highlighted two major factors contributing to these gaps: perceived discrimination and acculturation orientations. Discrimination is a well-established predictor of outcomes for ethnic and racial minorities (Benner, 2017; Bottiani et al., 2017; Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Among the studies included in this review, several examined different psychological aspects related to both individual and social factors.

Within the broader category of psychological well-being, cognitive abilities emerged as a crucial factor influencing the educational outcomes of immigrant and ethnic minority children. The studies reviewed highlighted several common themes and interesting findings, as well as some inconsistencies that warrant further discussion.

Both self-concept and self-efficacy play crucial roles in predicting academic achievement among immigrant students, though they influence different aspects of performance. Lauermaun et al.

(2020) found that while intelligence strongly predicts standardized test scores, especially in math, self-concept of ability is more closely linked to school grades. This means that students' beliefs about their abilities influence their daily academic performance, while intelligence affects standardized test results (Lauermann et al., 2020).

Similarly, the study by Motti-Stefanidi (2012) on immigrant middle schoolers in Greece highlighted the importance of self-efficacy—a belief in one's ability to manage and succeed in various situations (Bandura, 1990). This study found that self-efficacy was strongly linked to initial academic achievement, conduct, and peer popularity. However, unlike self-concept, self-efficacy did not influence changes in these areas over time. While self-efficacy provided a strong foundation at the start, it did not account for the growth or decline in these outcomes as students progressed through middle school. Both studies underscore the importance of students' beliefs about their abilities in shaping their academic performance, but they also highlight different dimensions of this influence.

Within the broader category of psychological well-being, cognitive abilities emerge as a crucial factor influencing the educational outcomes of immigrant and ethnic minority children. The studies reviewed highlighted several common themes and interesting findings, as well as some inconsistencies that warrant further discussion.

Some studies highlighted the complex interaction between cognitive abilities and educational environments, observing that instructional quality and school composition significantly influence learning outcomes. For example, discovery learning benefited low-risk students more, while desegregation alone did not improve the achievement of low-SES minority students (Vanlaar et al., 2014; Verhaeghe et al., 2018).

One recurring theme is the impact of early cognitive abilities, especially language proficiency, on academic outcomes. Becker and Klein (2021) found that German language skills at age three strongly predicted later school performance and school transition in Turkish-origin children. Similarly, Dollmann (2016) linked early language disparities to lower Gymnasium transition rates for these children compared to their native peers.

Another key theme is the role of metacognitive skills in academic performance. Helms-Lorenz and Jacobse (2008) explored this in a Dutch context, revealing that both native and migrant children exhibited similar levels of metacognitive skillfulness, with low-ability migrant children even showing slightly higher levels. This finding suggests that metacognitive abilities may serve as a

compensatory mechanism for some disadvantaged groups, potentially helping them navigate academic challenges despite other barriers.

This compensatory role of cognitive abilities becomes even more significant when considering the interaction between these abilities and social influences, particularly peer groups and school settings. For instance, Lorenz et al. (2020) found that peer socialization played a crucial role in shaping the educational expectations of Turkish and Eastern European students in Germany. In secondary-school tracks that offer diverse educational paths, adolescents adjusted their expectations based on the average expectations of their friends.

Language proficiency, as highlighted by Feliciano and Lanuza (2017), plays a crucial role in shaping academic aspirations and outcomes. The educational background of immigrant parents, or contextual attainment, further influences these outcomes, with children of immigrants often achieving higher levels of schooling than their native-born peers. This is despite facing socio-economic and language challenges. Moreover, language skills not only affect academic success directly but also moderate the relationship between educational aspirations and outcomes, as demonstrated by Miyamoto et al. (2020). The choice of educational trajectories, discussed by Tseng (2006), underscored this connection, as immigrant children often opt for more challenging courses, possibly driven by a combination of strong metacognitive abilities and high educational aspirations.

Research on educational inequalities highlights how structural factors, such as segregation, school-level variables, and discriminatory practices, significantly influence the aspirations and academic outcomes of immigrant students. Tjaden (2017) and Ledwith & Reilly (2014) emphasized that unequal access to educational resources can severely limit the academic aspirations and achievements of these students. Further complicating the issue, Razfar & Simon (2011) examined the academic trajectories of Latino ESL students, finding that structural patterns like vocational versus degree tracks and mainstreaming practices often guide their academic paths. These choices can constrain aspirations.

In addition to structural inequalities, family mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping academic aspirations and outcomes. Zhang et al. (2022) explored how parental involvement, and educational expectations positively influence math achievement, demonstrating that strong family support can counterbalance some of the disadvantages imposed by the educational system.

Moreover, the school environment itself can either bolster or diminish these aspirations. For instance, Arikan et al. (2020) found that students' attitudes toward subjects like math—such as their enjoyment of learning, confidence, and sense of belonging in school—are key predictors of both achievement and aspirations. Similarly, Birkelund (2020) shows how immigrant students in Denmark with high academic aspirations are likely to pursue more challenging academic tracks, but also face greater risks of failure.

Building on these structural and environmental influences, Mantovani et al. (2018) found that self-image is particularly influential among immigrant-origin students in Italy; those with those holding a positive self-image being more likely to pursue university education. However, the financial burdens and perceived employment value of higher education often undermine this self-image, negatively impacting their educational intentions. Interestingly, second-generation immigrant students in vocational tracks may exhibit stronger intentions to pursue higher education than their Italian peers, likely viewing it as a pathway to overcome socio-economic disadvantages.

In addition to self-image, self-concept and self-efficacy also played pivotal roles in academic performance among immigrant students. Lauermann et al. (2020) found that while intelligence strongly predicts standardized test scores, especially in math, self-concept of ability is more closely linked to school grades. This means that students' beliefs about their abilities influence their daily academic performance, while intelligence affects standardized test results. Complementing this, Motti-Stefanidi (2012) showed that self-efficacy—the belief in one's capacity to manage and succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1990)—was strongly linked to initial academic achievement and social outcomes among immigrant middle schoolers in Greece.

Adding to this, Park et al. (2012) emphasized that self-confidence is the strongest predictor of mathematics achievement among immigrant students, especially when paired with technology use. This effect is most pronounced for later and moderately immigrated students. Academic aspirations also significantly contribute to mathematics performance, particularly for those who immigrated later.

Another key process is acculturation. Building on this theme, Patel and colleagues (2016) highlighted how acculturation-related stress significantly contributes to the academic challenges faced by Latino/a immigrant students. This includes stressors related to language, family dynamics, and social interactions, leading to lower academic engagement, as evidenced by lower

attendance and achievement. The study found that life stressors, likely tied to acculturation, mediated the relationship between ethnicity and academic outcomes.

Several studies have examined the complex relationship between cultural maintenance, acculturation, and academic achievement among immigrant students. Portes (1999) maintaining one's original culture was negatively associated with academic achievement. The study also revealed that American identity and adaptation were negatively associated with academic outcomes, suggesting that higher levels of acculturation might not always be beneficial. The study also considered socio-psychological factors like self-concept, achievement motivation, and perceived discrimination, highlighting how acculturation interacts with these factors and ethnic identity in complex ways. The findings of a study by Guerra et al. (2019) added another layer by showing that perceived discrimination increases the desire for culture maintenance among immigrant children, which can indirectly reduce their school achievement. Interestingly, the negative effect of perceived discrimination on school achievement was mediated by a desire for culture maintenance rather than by a reduced desire for contact with native peers, and this effect was observed specifically among immigrant children. Dornbusch et al. (1987) highlighted the positive effects of maintaining cultural cohesiveness and familial continuity on academic performance, particularly for Asian and Pacific Islander students. They suggest that preserving cultural ties and experiences supports academic success, especially when moderated by generational status and ethnic group.

In a similar vein, António and Monteiro (2015) expanded on these findings by examining how minority acculturation attitudes and perceptions of majority support influence social adjustment among Black Lusophone adolescents in Portugal. They found that attitudes toward the host culture were key for both school achievement and intergroup relations, with meta-perceptions of majority support further enhancing these outcomes (António & Monteiro, 2015a). Their subsequent study highlighted that the perception of majority support moderates the impact of acculturation attitudes on social outcomes, with personal attitudes toward the host culture becoming more influential when perceived majority support is low (António & Monteiro, 2015b).

Two qualitative studies addressed the challenges faced by students navigating cultural duality in educational settings. One study by Vakalahi et al. (2009) presented the theme of cultural duality, which refers to the experience of living within two cultures—Pacific Islander and American—and the stress that arises from trying to navigate and reconcile the demands of both (Vakalahi et al.,

2007). The study highlights how Pacific Islander American students struggle with acculturation, which involves aligning their behavior and cognitive functions with both their native and American cultures. This duality often leads to emotional and physical stress, impacting their educational achievements and overall well-being (Vakalahi, 2009). Similarly, Cone et al. (2014) examined how Haitian students in South Florida navigate the clash between their home culture and U.S. school norms. The study investigated how Haitian students in South Florida struggle with the conflict between maintaining their Haitian cultural values and adapting to U.S. school norms. This cultural conflict affects their identity and academic performance. The study suggests that U.S. schools often fail to recognize and integrate Haitian cultural strengths, exacerbating academic and social challenges.

Further research by Duong et al. (2014) found that ethnic identity, along with gender, moderated the relationship between academic and social functioning among middle schoolers, specifically focusing on Vietnamese-American and Mexican-American students. This study highlighted group differences in achievement values and the complex ways in which ethnic identity interacts with academic and social outcomes.

Colding's (2009) study examined the educational gap between children of immigrants and native Danes, highlighting the role of behavioral differences. It finds that while family background affects educational outcomes, it does not fully explain the higher dropout rates among immigrant students, especially from vocational education. Behavioral factors, such as a preference for vocational training and language proficiency, play a significant role. Additional barriers include inadequate language skills, poor educational preparedness, and possible discrimination, all contributing to the educational attainment gap.

Weber et al. (2015) examined how Residence Culture Identity Strength, or the extent to which immigrants feel connected to the culture of their host country, influences cognitive performance under stereotype threat. They found that strong cultural and ethnic identity influence cognitive performance under stereotype threat in immigrant students and mitigates the negative effects of explicit stereotype threat on cognitive performance. In contrast, Ethnic Identity Strength, which measures attachment to one's ethnic group, did not significantly impact performance under stereotype threat. The study showed that while explicit stereotype threat negatively affected performance, strong residence culture identity served as a protective factor.

Similarly, Portes (1999) found that when students perceive themselves as being discriminated against or stereotyped, it negatively affects their academic performance. This aligns with Weber et al.'s findings, as both studies underscore the detrimental impact of perceived discrimination and stereotype threat on academic outcomes. However, Weber et al. further highlighted that strong identification with the host culture can buffer against these negative effects, a nuance not addressed in Portes' study.

The study by Owens and Lynch (2012) investigated the impact of stereotype threat on the academic performance of minority college students across different immigrant generations: first-generation, second-generation, and domestic (third-generation or higher). It focuses on two main mechanisms of identity threat—stereotype externalization and stereotype internalization—and their effects on academic outcomes. Stereotype externalization occurs when minority students recognize negative stereotypes about their group, leading to pressure to perform well and avoid confirming these stereotypes. This added pressure can create stress and potentially impair performance (Steele, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype internalization happens when minority students start to believe negative stereotypes about their group's intelligence. This belief can reduce academic effort, as students may feel their efforts are pointless. This disengagement, or disidentification, can lead to lower performance because students no longer see academic success as tied to their self-worth (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The study showed that the impact of stereotype threat on academic performance varies significantly across immigrant generations. First-generation immigrants are more resilient to stereotype threat, likely due to their strong belief in hard work and the American meritocracy. In contrast, domestic minorities are more susceptible to the negative effects of stereotype threat, particularly through internalization, which leads to reduced academic effort and lower grades.

Similarly, Froehlich et al. (2022) explored the effects of stereotype activation on academic performance but focused on Turkish-origin high school students in Germany. Through six experiments with high school students. The study explored whether negative competence stereotypes contribute to lower academic performance, using three types of stereotype activation: diagnosticity manipulation (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which indicated the test was diagnostic of ability; fairness manipulation (Spencer et al., 1999), which noted past group performance differences; and identity salience manipulation (Shih et al., 2006), which emphasized ethnic identity. The results showed that stereotype activation generally reduced the performance of

Turkish-origin students compared to Germans, though the effect size was small and not always significant. The study identified two key moderators: Entity Theory of Intelligence—students who viewed intelligence as fixed were more negatively affected by stereotype activation (Froehlich et al., 2016)—and Vertical Collectivism—a cultural orientation that heightened susceptibility to stereotype threat, leading to reduced performance when stereotypes were activated (Mok et al., 2017).

Ultimately, some studies analyzed depressive symptoms (e.g., Portes, 1999), anxiety (e.g., Turjanmaa & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020) or psychological adjustment.

3.7 Student's Characteristics

This category represents the second most frequently cited factor in literature. It focuses on factors related to the student level. In the studies reviewed, the analysis often includes student demographics, such as gender, age, month of birth, and the grade they are currently attending (e.g., Portes, 1999; Rodriguez, 2002; Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006). Some of these studies used these factors explicitly as control factors (e.g., Botezat, 2011; Celeste et al., 2019; Figlio et al., 2017). One study analyzed the student's experience of pregnancy (Obinna & Ohanian, 2020).

Another category covered all the factors related to student's educational background and prior academic success. These factors covered the student's prior performance or achievement, *grade point average* (GPA), academic preparation in Math and Science and Technology or reading, writing and cognitive skills, or more generally grade in primary and secondary as well as learning preconditions of the elementary students (e.g., Birkelund, 2020; Brinbaum & Lutz, 2017; Dollmann, 2016; Jia, 2019; van Welie et al., 2013; Tuppatt et al., 2016). However, in much of the existing literature, student's characteristic factors were often treated as a control variable or background factor rather than a central focus. For example, Marx et al. (2021) focused in their analysis on the student's initial reading proficiency level as a control factor.

Student characteristics in some studies, interacted with other variables, either amplifying or mitigating their effects, or mediating their relationship with academic outcomes. For example, Areepattamannil (2012) observed that the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement is mediated by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with amotivation playing no significant role. However, various studies focused on factors related to school engagement,

motivation, and behavior, considering academic motivation in terms of intrinsic motivation, achievement motivation, task motivation, as well as students' overall motivation and engagement, autonomy, and commitment to school (e.g., Miyamoto et al., 2020; Perez-Izaguirre, 2019; Vakalahi, 2009).

Building upon the mediation role of student's characteristic factors, Roche & Kuperminc (2012) examined the mediation effect of school belonging between acculturative stress dimensions and low academic performance among Latino middle schoolers. The findings indicated that while discrimination stress (but not immigration-related stress) negatively impacted school performance through reduced school belonging, immigration-related stress was associated with age of immigration but not with school performance. Few studies have focused on students' feelings of belonging to the school (e.g., Arikan et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2015a & 2015b).

The student characteristics in some studies operated as moderator. For example, Miyamoto et al. (2020) studied the moderating effect of the student's exposure to the destination country's language in the relationship between educational orientations and achievement. Interestingly, they found that that immigrant students who use the destination language in their everyday interactions experience benefit more from higher levels of educational aspirations and academic motivation than do those with less exposure to the language. This implies that students who are more exposed to the destination language may better translate their educational aspirations and motivations into higher academic achievement, helping to explain the attitude-achievement paradox. However, some studies did center the factors related to the student's language skills. Some studies examined English fluency levels. Demie (2018) investigated the performance of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in English schools and found that those who were not fluent in English underperformed in reading, writing, and math compared to their monolingual English-speaking peers. The study highlighted the heterogeneity of EAL students, emphasizing that EAL status alone does not accurately capture their varying linguistic and ethnic backgrounds or levels of English proficiency.

In this review a category was created for factors related to proficiency and progression in the language of instruction. Studies examined aspects such as reading processes, comprehension, and English fluency, as well as bilingual training before school entry (e.g., Linde & Löfgren, 1988a; Marx et al., 2021; Pong & Hao, 2007; Warren, 1996). Others focused on the initial local language skills, progression in English learners (EL) or English as Second Language (ESL) levels (e.g.,

Johnson, 2019; Razfar & Simon, 2011a; Tjaden, 2017), narrative abilities in Spanish and English, and German language comprehension (e.g., Bailey et al., 2008; Johnson, 2019; Tjaden, 2017).

Another category addressed migrant students' language background, including whether English is their first language (e.g., Huang, 2000) and the language spoken at home (e.g., Vanlaar et al., 2014; Verhaeghe et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2015a).

When studies focused on student's characteristics as a primary variable, its effect becomes evident. For example, a study by Tuppatt et al. (2016) examined how individual competencies and institutional contexts interact to shape early educational inequalities in Germany. The study found that children of immigrants were significantly more likely to receive recommendations for delayed school entry compared to children of native-born parents, primarily due to perceived school readiness. However, these ethnic disparities were substantially reduced under reformed enrollment procedures that de-emphasized school readiness as a requirement for entry, highlighting the critical role of institutional policies in mediating the effects of student-level characteristics.

Some studies considered the factors related to student's school pathways and curriculum. These studies were related to school career as well as the quality of track and subject area (science, mathematics, reading) and early educational tracking based on ability (e.g., Combet & Oesch, 2021; Ledwith & Reilly, 2013; Nagy et al., 2019; Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016). For example, Razfar and Simon (2020) studied the role of English language proficiency in the academic success of Latino ESL students in the United States. They found that students who mainstreamed earlier or enrolled concurrently in college-level content courses were more successful in terms of course completion and GPA. This study illustrates the significant impact of linguistic characteristics and early academic integration on immigrant students' educational outcomes, further emphasizing the importance of institutional factors in shaping academic trajectories.

In addition, research included factors related to attitudes toward learning and learning strategies, such as deep versus surface-level learning, and learning as recitation to meet teacher expectations, as well as average study hours, homework time, attitudes and effort toward schoolwork (e.g., Andriessen et al., 2006; Cone et al., 2014; Šori et al., 2011). The study by Andriessen et al. (2006) explored the motivational impact of future goal setting on academic achievement, specifically for minority students of Turkish and Moroccan origin in the Netherlands. The study found that positive perceptions of the instrumentality of future goals increased task motivation and adaptive learning strategies for both minority and non-minority students. Notably, internally regulated future goals

were particularly influential, as they were strongly related to enhanced task motivation and the adoption of more effective learning strategies. This highlights the importance of future goal setting in shaping students' motivation and learning approaches, especially when these goals are perceived as personally meaningful.

Additionally, some studies explored future goals by assessing initial educational goals, future goal setting (perceived instrumentality), future-oriented motivation to learn science, and engagement with teachers and counselors about future plans, as well as perseverance and passion for long-term goals (e.g., Arikan et al., 2020; Di Bartolomeo, 2011; Figlio et al., 2017; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Tovar-García, 2017). A study by Tovar-García (2017) investigated the impact of long-term goals on educational achievements in a sample of ninth-grade students, including migrants from Tatarstan, Russia. Although the study found no educational gap between migrant and native students, but long-term goals significantly explained the educational success of migrant groups, though native students outperformed ethnic Russian migrants.

Few studies, also focused on student' educational experience and factors such as perceptions of the academic journey, students' pre-migration schooling experience, or their educational sense of self (Cone et al., 2014; Potochnick, 2018). The study by Potochnick (2018) found that within the study's sample population which consisted of U.S. 10th graders, over 10% of foreign-born youth experience interrupted schooling, which is linked to lower academic achievement and attainment compared to their peers, although these students were equally or even more engaged in school. Premigration demographics explained some of the academic performance differences, with the effects varying based on whether the students arrived during primary or secondary school.

Technological engagement played a key role in addressing academic disparities. Two studies focused on the influence of technology use on the achievement gap. Park et al. (2012) found that technology use positively impacted math performance, particularly among Hispanic immigrant students who arrived after age 10, helping to overcome cultural and language barriers.

Similarly, Kim (2018) highlighted that access to information and communication technology (ICT) and targeted ICT use improved math outcomes for immigrant students, whereas generic ICT use had a slight negative effect. These findings underscore the potential of educational technology to narrow the achievement gap and support immigrant integration.

A category was created to the factors related to ethnic background on academic outcomes. This category includes factors such as students' nativity or migration status or citizenship, and whether

they are children of mixed-parent couples or have one migrant parent (e.g., Dronkers et al., 2012; Minello & Barban, 2012; Pong & Hao, 2007; Portes, 1999; Spees et al., 2016) In addition, various studies addressed generational differences and generational behaviors, ethnicity or minority status (e.g., Brinbaum & Lutz, 2017; Duong et al., 2014; Rodriguez, 2002; van Welie et al., 2013).

3.8 Community and Environment

Various studies included in the present review examined factors related to student's community and environment. Some focused on language policy or bilingual context or bilingual education as well as English as second language (ESL) (e.g., Linde & Löfgren, 1988d; Razfar & Simon, 2011a & b; Reyes & Carrasco, 2018).

Others explored factors residential environment and neighborhood characteristics, including cultural characteristics including cultural elements like local culture, educational status, the proportion of foreign-born residents, and the percentage of college-educated individuals in the area. Additional factors included neighborhood linguistic isolation, racial/ethnic homogeneity, limited English proficiency (LEP), co-racial idle peers, and family residential duration (e.g., Pong & Hao, 2007; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006; Wang & Sakamoto, 2021). In Wang and Sakamoto's (2021) study, these community factors were used as control variables. They investigated the intergenerational transmission of education among Hispanic Americans using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), focusing on how county-level demographic and socioeconomic factors influence educational mobility for 3+ generation and 2nd generation Hispanic men. The study found that 3+ generation men had higher mobility in areas with larger Hispanic populations, while 2nd generation men benefited from areas with more college-educated residents. These factors did not significantly affect the mobility of Hispanic women or non-Hispanic individuals, highlighting the role of local community and environmental factors in shaping educational outcomes.

From a socio-economic perspective, factors included neighborhood SES, disadvantaged neighborhoods (mean income, proportion of two-parent households, employment and level of schooling), community unemployment rate, median household income, and percentage below the poverty line (e.g., Pong & Hao, 2007; Wang & Sakamoto, 2021). The category also covered socio-spatial location, housing turnover, and community mobility (e.g., Beach et al., 2013). In a study by Pong and Hao (2007), community factors, including neighborhood and school conditions, were

investigated for their effects on achievement gaps between adolescents of different nativities and ethnicities. The study highlights an interaction of factors, showing that neighborhood and school characteristics mediate the relationship between community conditions and academic performance. Specifically, the impact of these factors was greater for immigrant children, emphasizing the role of both neighborhood and school environments in shaping academic outcomes.

A category covered studies that addressed school climate and cultural policies including educational setting and the school community in general (e.g., Song, 2011; Vakalahi, 2009). Key topics include authentic caring, trust, classroom discipline, critical consciousness, and polyculturalism in school policies. Approaches to diversity, such as multiculturalism, assimilation, and colorblindness, were also examined (e.g., Baker, 2017; Celeste et al., 2019; Perez-Izaguirre, 2019; Schachner et al., 2021; Schubert & Becker, 2010). Some studies also focused on negative school climate and color-evasion approaches in schools (e.g., Celeste et al., 2019; Pong & Hao, 2007). For example, Celeste et al., 2019 analyzed how different diversity approaches in Belgian middle schools influenced ethnic gaps in student outcomes. Their findings indicated that multicultural policies helped reduce these gaps in school belonging and achievement, while colorblindness and assimilationism were linked to wider gaps, emphasizing the importance of inclusive diversity policies in schools.

Most factors were categorized under school diversity and socioeconomic context. focusing on variables like immigrant concentration, ethnic school segregation, media representation, and the proportion of first-generation or racially diverse students and the percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) in the school (e.g., Pivovarova & Powers, 2019; Pomianowicz, 2021; van Welie et al., 2013).

The category included factors related to school enrollment policies and programs, comprising factors such as school choice, access, selective admittance, and student enrollment patterns (e.g., Dronkers et al., 2012; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Ledwith & Reilly, 2013; Rodriguez, 2002). Some studies focused on school support programs, reformed enrollment procedures, and participation in schemes like PLC, VTOS (identifying schools that provide Post-Leaving Certificate courses or are enrolled in the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme), DEIS (schools enrolled in the School Support Programme funded by the Department of Education and Skills), or Title I funds for disadvantaged schools (e.g., Ledwith & Reilly, 2014; Spees et al., 2016; Tuppatt et al., 2016). For

example, Spees et al. (2016) examined how demographic shifts, such as the increasing presence of immigrant families, intersect with educational policies like NCLB and ESSA, highlighting their impact on Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and the broader challenges faced by schools in addressing the needs of this subgroup.

In addition, the category of school policy and educational tracking included studies on tracking within and between schools, socially selective transitions to secondary education, curriculum navigation challenges, and system stratification, including the age of selection (e.g., Dronkers et al., 2012; Pomianowicz, 2021; Schubert & Becker, 2010 Razfar & Simon, 2020b). Additionally, some studies examined constraints and institutional factors, mainstreaming, and features of educational systems (e.g., Borgna & Contini, 2014; Colding, 2009; Dronkers et al., 2012). Particularly a study by Pomianowicz (2021) examined the interaction of school tracking policies with other factors in relation to academic outcomes. It investigated how educational tracking affects reading achievement inequalities between second-generation immigrant and non-immigrant students across 28 Western countries. The results revealed that higher levels of tracking significantly disadvantage second-generation immigrant students in reading performance, with school characteristics, such as immigrant concentration, mediating this relationship. This suggests that a high concentration of immigrant peers in schools amplifies the negative effects of tracking on the reading outcomes of immigrant students.

Factors related to school quality and the educational environment included participation in school Olympiads, subject specialization, special teaching methods, and school autonomy over resources, curriculum, and tracking. Studies also addressed school resources and teaching quality, examining overall and immigrant-specific resources, technical resources, instructional materials, special language courses, teacher certifications, student-teacher ratios, and the percentage of math and reading teachers with advanced degrees (e.g., Dronkers et al., 2012; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Potochnick, 2018; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006; Shapira, 2012; Spees et al., 2016; Tovar-García, 2017;).

Studies also addressed factors related to school size and type (primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary) including enrollment size (e.g., Lee et al., 2017, Lee et al., 2018; Meunier, 2011; Pivovarova & Powers, 2019; Vanlaar et al., 2014).

The final category focused on socio-spatial factors, including school safety, environment quality, distance to school, and location (urban/suburban/rural) or region, particularly in Italy (e.g.,

Azzolini et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2017; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020 Pivovarova & Powers, 2019; Pomianowicz, 2021; van Welie et al., 2013). In a study by Lee et al. (2017), the perceptions of school safety and educational expectations, served as mediators, which were examined in relation to the negative social environment immigrant adolescents experience in U.S. public schools and their academic achievement. Findings indicated that the negative relationships that students encounter, such as peer discrimination, negatively affect their academic outcomes, with the effects mediated by how safe students perceive their school environment to be and their educational expectations. Furthermore, the study identifies a double mediation effect, suggesting that these relational and attitudinal factors play significant roles in shaping academic outcomes for immigrant adolescents.

Table 3.3 Studies Included and Corresponding Factors

Citation	Independent variables /Factors	Outcome
(Andriessen et al., 2006)	Ethnic origin, (control) Gender, School track, Parental Education, Ethnic Composition of the school Teacher ratings of students' effort and performance) Internal regulation, Task motivation, Deep Learning, Surface-level learning	Motivation for school tasks Learning strategies
(António & Monteiro, 2015a)	Minority acculturation attitudes,	School achievement, Perceived quality of intergroup relations.
(António & Monteiro, 2015b)	Minority members' acculturation attitudes, Perception of majority support for immigrants learning the host culture	School achievement Perceived quality of intergroup relations
(Areepattamannil, 2012)	School self-concept Age, Gender, Country of origin, Current overall grades in school	School achievement(grade)
(Arikan et al., 2020)	Immigrant status, background resources, Host country characteristics and policies, Students liking of learning mathematics, The confidence in mathematics, The experienced bullying, The students' sense of school belonging	Math achievement
(Azzolini & Barone, 2013)	Generational status, (social class) salary and occupation status, Parents' country of origin, (control) Gender, Region of residence	Upper secondary school participation of youths: Dropout and enrolment in vocational, technical or general schools

(Azzolini et al., 2012).	<p>Immigrant generation status, Parents' places of birth, Availability of educationally relevant resources at home, Parental education, Highest occupational status of parents, Ability of cognitively stimulating resources at home, Language spoken at home Specific track in which the student is enrolled (only for Italy), School ownership (public/private)(for Spain) (control) Gender, Age, School region (in Italy), Area(urban/rural), Proportion of first-generation immigrants enrolled in each school</p>	<p>Performance in reading and mathematics Early academic performance</p>
(Bailey et al., 2008)	<p>Spanish-language narrative abilities and English-language narrative abilities, Oral Spanish-language abilities English-language arts skills Level of metapragmatic awareness in English</p>	<p>Performance in reading and mathematics Early academic performance</p>
(Baker, 2017)	<p>Social support, authentic caring in classroom (perception of) peer support social relationships</p>	<p>Focal outcome: students' success Enrollment in advanced courses Additional outcome: Linguistic success</p>
(Barban & White, 2011)	<p>Generational status, Parents' birthplace and by length of residency in Italy, Country of Origin, Students' demographic characteristics, Access to human capital, Family environment and college aspirations</p>	<p>Scholastic Outcome (final exam end of their third year of middle school), Secondary school choice</p>

(Baysu & Phalet, 2012)	<p>Academic track at entry into secondary education, and at entry into higher education: leaving school or continuing, Intergroup friendship, Number of Belgian friends, Friends ethnic background, Perceived teacher support, Language used at home, Gender, Perception of the number of immigrant-origin peers, (control) Each parents' education</p>	<p>School careers and educational attainment (track placement and dropout rates at various educational stages)</p>
(Beach et al., 2013)	<p>Socio-Economic conditions, Migration, Proficiency in the language of instruction, Neighborhood and socio- spatial location (Living Context), Segregation and Media Representation</p>	<p>Academic performance</p>
(Becker & Klein, 2021).	<p>Migration background, Household income, Job position, Parental education, Monthly net household income, Academic achievement in Math, German and Science (fourth grade mid-term report), Children's German language skills, General cognitive skills</p>	<p>Type of secondary school,</p>

(Birkelund, 2020)	Ethnic origin, High-aspiring educational choices, Gender, Family type (two parents, single parents, etc.), Parental education, Parental social class(occupation), Compulsory school GPA, Enrolment in academic upper secondary education,	Compulsory school GPA, Choice of upper secondary education(Track type)
(Borgna & Contini, 2014)	Features of educational systems, Highest occupational status of parents, The highest parental education, Home possessions (family wealth, cultural possessions, educational resources, and number of books at home). Distance between countries, Marginalization in schools with low-performing children, Linguistic distance between origin- and destination-countries' official languages,	School performance (test score in math, reading and science)
(Botezat, 2011)	Parental education levels, Educational resources and possessions Cultural resources (books at home) (control) Age, Gender, grade	School performance (test score in math, reading and science)
(Brinbaum & Lutz, 2017)	Migration/ethnicity and generation, Gender, Social background, Parental education, parental occupation, GPA, Grade retention (the student has ever been retained a grade in school)	Secondary educational attainment (Educational trajectories and attainment: school completion/High school diploma and different types of baccalaureate=track), Educational aspirations and expectations, Parental expectation
(Cahan et al., 2001)	Age at immigration	Educational achievement (Verbal and Math score)
(Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj , 2014)	Socioeconomic Status, Parental Nativity, Ethnicity	Focal outcome: Track choice Additional outcome: Choice behavior

(Celeste et al., 2019)	<p>school diversity approaches (Multiculturalism, assimilation & colorblindness), The school track of each student Parental education, (control)Ethnic school composition, Age, Gender</p>	student outcomes
(Chuhuon et al., 2010)	<p>Cultural values and family obligations of the ethnic group, Parents' expectation Parents' low level of language The student's ability The student's difficulty Family cultural values Teachers' attitude and inspiration toward student's future Influenced of less oriented peers</p>	School success
(Colding, 2009)	<p>Ethnic Group/nativity, Generation immigrants, Paternal educational attainment, Maternal educational attainment, Income, Work Experience, Self-employment, Duration of stay of each parent in Denmark Living with Both Biological Parents, Number of Siblings, Disadvantaged Neighborhood, Gender of the child, Country of Origin, Age at arrival, Behavioral differences, Differences in constraints and institutional factors</p>	Educational progression and attainment

(Combet & Oesch, 2021)	Parental occupation, Canton of residence, Age, Gender, Migrant background, Parents' country of birth, Educational track, School grades, Reading literacy test score	Highest educational attainment at age 30
(Cone et al., 2014)	Educational experiences, Learning as recitation to meet teacher expectations, Student identity and the structures of schooling, Teacher as strict parent or lenient spectator in discipline, Adolescent's sense of self shaped by reflections mirrored back peers	Focal outcome: Academic success Additional outcome: Identity development
(Demie, 2018)	Language spoken at home, English fluency levels	Educational performance
(Demie, 2019)	Lack of fluency in English, Pupil mobility, socio-economic status.	Academic attainment and performance
(Di Bartolomeo, 2011)	Generation status, (control) Parents' highest occupation, Language spoken at home, Highest educational level of parents Index of cultural possessions (e.g., personal computer, scientific books). Pupils' interest in scientific topics, Future-oriented motivation to learn science, Science-related activities. Proportion of immigrants' children in each school	Educational performance (science)
(Dimitrova et al., 2018)	Ethnic socialization (discrimination experiences)	Perceived school achievement (performance), Life satisfaction (well being),

(Dollmann, 2016)	<p>Ethnic background and place of birth of parents and grand parents, The place of highest educational level by student, Prior performance (reading, writing, math, cognitive skills), Gender and age</p>	<p>Transition to different tracks in secondary school</p>
(Dornbusch et al., 1987)	<p>Parenting styles, Being culturally variant, ethnic identification, Family cultural values, Acculturation patterns (maintenance of cultural cohesiveness, adaptation through a cultural process, assimilation), Generational behavior differences, Language spoken at home,</p>	<p>Academic performance (grades), Self-esteem, Effort engagement</p>

(Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011)

Parents' education,
Household income,
Age at immigration,
Length of parents' stays in France,
Country of origin,
Skills of immigrants,
Parents' fluency in French,
Socioeconomic status of immigrants in their home country,
Length of stay in the host country,
Place of schooling,
Number,
Order and gender of siblings,
Child's migration history,
Gender,
Age,
Place of birth)
Parental migration history,
The length of stay in France when the child was 10
Parental proficiency in speaking French,
Host language fluency,
Length of stay in the host country,
Parental years of schooling,
Crossed effects between the place of schooling and the proficiency in French level.

Educational outcomes.

Educational attainment (Ethnic educational gap among Second-generation immigrants).

(Drake, 2014)

Neighborhood linguistic isolation (racial/ethnic homogeneity of Neighborhood),
Time in country (US),
Percentage ELL in school,
Mobility
(control) Community percentage unemployment,
Median household income,
Percentage with a bachelor's degree,
Percentage below the poverty line,
Percentage of the community mobility (ages 5 and older who lived in a Different home in 1995),
Student race/ethnicity,
Socioeconomic status,
Gender,
Student enrollment in school,
Percentage of math and reading teachers with a professional master's degree or higher,
Percentage free/ reduced lunch, and percentage enrolled in remedial math.

Student Achievement = School Inputs & Non-school Inputs

(Driessen, 2001)

Ethnic origin of the students,
Financial resources,
Parental reading behavior,
Educational resources within the family,
Mother's education, father's education,
Father's occupation

Language and math test scores

(Dronkers et al., 2012)

Educational systems,
School composition ,
Track level ,
Parents' occupational status,
Educational level of the parents,
Material or cultural resources at the students' homes,
School grade,
Gender(control),
Regions of origin,
Second-generation migrant,
One parent migrant,
School track,
Ethnicity,
Region of immigration,
Selective admittance of students to the school,
Teacher shortage,
Student-staff ratio,
Urbanisation,
School size,
Private/public,
Stratification(in education system, Age of selection

Linguistic performance

(Duong et al., 2014)

Ethnic identity,
Home language,
Generational status,
Family structure
Socioeconomic status

Achievement value nominations (Friends'
GPA, Grade point averages)
Social functioning (peer popularity, Unpopularity,
social acceptance, Social rejection, Number of
friends)

(Entorf & Lauk, 2008)

Grade Attending(8th, 9th Lower)
Gender,Foreign born,
National language at home,
Living With Two Parents Or Guardians,
More than 100 books at home,
Home educational resources,
homework time,
Parental Occupation,
Student-teaching staff ratio,
Quality of schools' educational resources
Special language courses at school, school location,
hours of schooling per year,
diss: schools' contribution to the aggregated dissimilarity index,
school autonomy,
teacher autonomy,
selection by residence,
selection by performance,
private school

Achievement(in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy)

(Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017).

Immigrant generation and race/ ethnicity,
Gender,
Age,
Parental years of schooling completed,
Household income,
Parental occupation,
Two-parent household,
Number of household members,
Parental educational aspirations,
Respondents' aspirations and expectations.
GPA

Respondents' contextual attainment. Our main
outcome is years of schooling completed
Years of schooling,
Parental contextual attainment(schooling),

(Figlio et al., 2017)	<p>Long-Term Orientation and educational attainment (fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards, perseverance and thrift),</p> <p>Country of origin of the child,</p> <p>Language spoken at home,</p> <p>Marital status,</p> <p>Age of the mother,</p> <p>Mother's and father's place of birth</p> <p>Migration generation,</p> <p>Mother's place of birth</p> <p>(control)age in months,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>English proficiency,</p> <p>Low-income status,</p> <p>Maternal educational attainment,</p> <p>Maternal marital status at time of birth,</p> <p>Whether the mother had the child when she was younger than 16,</p> <p>The number of older siblings ,</p> <p>The zip code of the home address at time of birth,</p> <p>Cultural values for future goals</p>	<p>Focal Outcomes: Test scores in math and reading,</p> <p>Probability of being retained,</p> <p>Absence rates,</p> <p>Disciplinary incidents,</p> <p>High school graduation,</p> <p>Additional outcomes: Enrollment in advanced classes,</p> <p>Fraction of advanced classes in scientific subjects,</p> <p>School choice,</p> <p>Gifted students' program</p>
(Froehlich et al., 2022a)[Martiny et al., 2014a (published)]	<p>Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background),</p> <p>Stereotype activation (by fairness manipulation in test instructions).</p>	<p>Academic performance (mathematical performance)</p>
(Froehlich et al., 2022b) [Mok et al., 2014(Unpublished)]	<p>Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background),</p> <p>Stereotype activation by diagnosticity manipulation in test instructions.</p>	<p>Academic performance (mathematical performance)</p>

(Froehlich et al., 2022c)[Martiny et al., 2014b(Unpublished)]	Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background), Stereotype activation by fairness manipulation in test instructions.	Academic performance (verbal performance)
(Froehlich et al., 2022d)[Froehlich et al., 2016a(published)]	Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background), Stereotype activation by diagnosticity manipulation in test instructions.	Academic performance (verbal performance)
(Froehlich et al., 2022e)[Froehlich et al., 2016a (Published)]	Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background), Stereotype activation by diagnosticity manipulation in test instructions.	Academic performance (verbal performance)
(Froehlich et al., 2022f)[Mok et al., 2017(Published)]	Participants' ethnicity (German vs. Turkish migration background), Stereotype activation by identity salience manipulation in test instructions.	Academic performance (verbal performance)
(Gijsberts & Van der Ploeg, 2016)	Age, Gender, Origin(ethnicity), Generation of immigration, Parental education	Achievement in language and arithmetic
(Glock et al., 2013a)	Teacher Bias (Caseinconsistent student case descriptions for teacher) Ethnicity (students with vs. without immigrant backgrounds)	Number of highest track decisions ratings of the probability of successful attendance in the highest school track (teacher's judgment for tracking).
(Glock et al., 2013b)	Teacher Bias (Case inconsistent student case descriptions for teacher) , Ethnicity (students with vs. without immigrant backgrounds), Information Type (performance- vs. nonperformance-related information) ,	Number of highest track decisions ratings of the probability of successful attendance in the highest school track (teacher's judgment for tracking). Reading times and judgment latencies

(Goodwin & Stanton, 2022)	Teaching practices of the master teacher to support the student Beliefs and attitudes of the teacher	Focal outcome: Academic achievement and performance of newcomer immigrant students Additional outcome: Levels of student engagement and agency, Success and thriving of students in their educational environment
(Govaris et al., 2021)	Recognitive Experiences (moral respect; (b) empathy; and (c) social esteem.(=recognition) by teachers and by peer), Gender, Ethnicity, Family education	Academic achievement, Self-esteem
(Guerra et al., 2019)	Perceived discrimination, Acculturation orientations Gender, Age, Place of birth (for both children and parents), Age of arrival in Portugal (for immigrant children only)	Academic achievement, Social-emotional well-being and Perceptions of peer acceptance at school
(Hou & Zhang, 2015)	immigrant generation regional differences (parental education, student, educational aspiration, sex, language spoken at home, family structure, parental occupational status, number of books at home, school type, and year, language spoken at home, ethnocultural characteristics	Reading and math performance (in 15 years old) Attainment (High school completion and University enrollment in 20-24 ys, obtaining 1 degree by 29 years)
(Haxton, 2011)	Parents familiarity with the educational system, Parents language knowledge, Parents with limited education	school choice
(Helms-Lorenz & Jacobse, 2008)	Native vs. Migrant status, Intellectual Ability Metacognitive Skillfulness Fluid and crystallized intelligence	Metacognitive skills, school performance.
(Huang, 2000)	Generation of immigration, Home language background.	Math and science achievement.

(Jia, 2019)	Family income, Parental education levels, Immigrant generations, Race and ethnicity, Age, Gender, K-12 Schooling Location (abroad or in the U.S), Individual preferences towards STEM fields. Academic preparation in Math and Science	STEM achievement in K12
(Johnson, 2019)	Number of years being an English Learner (EL), (control) Academic performance in eighth grade, student demographic information	Focal outcome: Course-taking (Specifically, general and advanced course enrollment in high school) Academic achievement and attainment Academic competence (related to positive academic performance 6 month later)
(Jutengren & Medin, 2019)	Cross-ethnic friendship, Prosocial behavior, (control) School attended (among the two schools)	Academic adjustment (measured through self- reported GPA, importance of academic success, and educational aspirations and expectations)
(Kiang, et al., 2013)	Socioeconomic stress, Family obligation (values and expectations regarding assistance and support to the family)	Academic achievement (Math achievement)
(Kihara, 2022)	Parental education level, parental nativity	

(Kim, 2018)	<p>Information, communication, and technology (ICT) (ICT access(the number of digital information devices in a student's homes), generic ICT use(how frequently they used a computer or a tablet for schoolwork at home, at school, and in other places), and specific ICT use(whether students used the Internet to access assignments posted online by their teachers, to collaborate with classmates on assignments or projects, and to communicate with teachers)),</p> <p>Immigrant background and generation,</p> <p>Primary language at home,</p> <p>Parents' highest education level,</p> <p>Home education resources</p>	Math performance, mathematics self-efficacy (efficacy)
(Kiss, 2013)	<p>Immigration generation,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>Language spoken at home</p> <p>(Control)School type (primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary)</p>	School grades in math
(Kuyvenhoven & Boterman, 2021)	<p>Age,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>Year of starting secondary education,</p> <p>Migrant background,</p> <p>Parental education</p> <p>Household income of all primary and secondary school students residing in a neighborhood,</p> <p>Primary schools SES (the number of pupils, the school denomination)</p>	Primary school track advice

(Lauer mann et al., 2020)	<p>Intelligence, Ability self-concepts, Gender, Immigration background, SES, and academic track, Primary language spoken in the family, Highest level of parental job prestige in the family, Level of education and the income distribution for different occupations, Student's academic track, Student's cognitive ability</p>	Performance in math and German
(Ledwith & Reilly, 2013)	<p>School enrolled in the School Support Program funded under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools policy (DEIS school), Schools providing Post-Leaving Certificate courses or enrolled in the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (PLC or VTOS), Migrant status, First-choice school, Gender, English speaker</p>	School choice school achievement
(Ledwith & Reilly, 2014)	<p>Student's place of birth and/ or migration history Parents' place of birth and/or migration history, School urbanicity schools providing Post Leaving Certificate courses or enrolled in the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (PLC or VTOS School), School enrolled in the School Support Programme funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DEIS School) (control) English/Irish speaker, University aspirations, Gender</p>	School choice school achievement

(Lee & Kim, 2020)	Ethnicity, Generation status, Parental education level	Actual achievement level (math test scores). Perceived achievement level (self-concept)
(Lee et al., 2017)	School safety, Absence of academic supporters, Presence of non academically oriented friends, Presence of dropout friends, Discrimination experienced from peers, discrimination experienced from teachers or counselors, (control) School dropout percentage, School size(based on the total student enrollment)	Academic achievement (Performance) (GPA)
(Lee et al., 2018)	Friends who do not plan to attend college, Friends who dropped out of school, Absence of academic supporters, Discrimination experienced from institutional teachers or counselors, peer discrimination, Total student body size in school, School dropout rate	Academic achievement (high school GPA)
(Lenkeit et al., 2015)	Parent's education, Parents' occupational status, Students' home possessions (pc, console, internet access, room, TV, smartphone), Number of books at home) Parent's education, Parents' highest occupation, Employment status, Cultural consumption frequency), Parental educational expectations, Parents' interest in achievement, Parents' positive feedback, Parents encouragement	Educational attainment

(Lenkeit et al., 2018)	Gender, Immigrant Background, Language use, Number of books at home, Parents' highest occupational status (HISEI), School mean of immigrant background students in percent, School mean of parents' highest occupational status (HISEI).	Focal outcome: Educational attainment. (reading attainment (reading performance in all cycles)
(Li & Yang, 2015)	Languages spoken at home, Child's primary language (control)Gender, Ethnicity, Parental occupation, Parent's education, Family income)	Reading (literacy) achievement
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988a)	Language proficiency (Finnish and Swedish), Family's residential time social background, Intelligence, Peer relations (proportion of Swedish friends, Parental professional status, Bilingual training before school entrance	School achievement (Grade 3)
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988b)	Socio-economic status, Parents' occupation, Parent proficiency in Swedish, Parents' citizenship, Language of communication at home, Instructional language at school, Finnish proficiency, Swedish proficiency	Student achievement in mathematics, Swedish, and English
(Linde & Löfgren, 1988c)	SES, parental citizenship, Parental competency in Swedish, Instructional language at school, Language proficiency.	Achievement in Swedish, mathematics, and English and Finnish

(Linde & Löfgren,1988d)	Socio-economic factors, Parent's citizenship, Parent's proficiency in Swedish, Frequency of Finnish at home, Instructional language at school, Finnish and Swedish language proficiency, Environmental factors in the home, Bilingual education	Achievement in Swedish
(Lorenz et al., 2020)	Friendship ties, Average educational expectations of friends, secondary-school track, Gender, GPA, Cognitive abilities, Ethnic background, Parental education)	Focal outcome: Educational expectations (measured by aspiration to educational attainment) Additional outcome: Friendship
(Mantovani et al., 2018)	School track, Italian/immigrant origin, Parents' educational qualifications, Parental occupation, Gender, Age, Area of origin and timing of migratory experiences, Academic effort (number of hours devoted to study on a daily basis), Aptitude self-image, Attitude self-image School self-image, Parental support, Lack of knowledge of family members	Academic performance (Regularity of school career Mean mark in math and Italian)

(Marx et al., 2021)	<p>Time spent in mainstream education after exiting preparatory classes</p> <p>Individual factors (Socioeconomic status (SES)</p> <p>Parental education levels</p> <p>Language spoken at home</p> <p>Age at immigration</p> <p>Country of origin</p> <p>Prior educational background</p> <p>(control) Initial reading proficiency level,</p> <p>Mainstream students' reading achievement,</p> <p>Lower-Level reading processes and reading comprehension,</p> <p>Educational setting</p>	Reading subskills, reading progression
(Meunier, 2011)	<p>Immigrant VS Swiss citizens,</p> <p>immigration generation,</p> <p>Family structure,</p> <p>Number of siblings,</p> <p>Parental education,</p> <p>Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI),</p> <p>Number of books at home,</p> <p>School size,</p> <p>School/teacher ratio,</p> <p>Proportion of teacher's with ISCED 5 in literacy and Cantons</p>	Reading, mathematics and science literacy achievement
(Minello & Barban, 2012)	<p>Migration generation status,</p> <p>Parents' and students' birthplace, age at immigration,</p> <p>Country of Origin,</p> <p>Students' perception of the value of friendship ties,</p> <p>Educational expectations,</p> <p>Parental education,</p> <p>Parents' occupation,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>Number of siblings,</p> <p>Children of mixed couples,</p> <p>Area of residence</p>	<p>Educational choice: Short-term expectations (Type of secondary track)</p> <p>Long-term aspirations (Plans to attend university)</p>

(Miyamoto et al., 2020)	Educational aspirations and academic motivation, Exposure to the destination country's language	School achievement (reading achievement)
(Moon et al., 2009)	Perception of majority support for immigrants learning the host culture, Parenting school involvement, Parenting style, Parent education, Length of stay in the US	School achievement (most recent grades of four subjects (e.g., English, mathematics, and science))
(Motti-Stefanidi, 2012)	Self-efficacy, Parental school involvement, Immigrant status, Single-parent household, Low professional status of parents, Parent and high residential density, (quotient of the number of people living in the house to the number of the rooms)	Academic achievement, conduct (breaking or following the rules of school and society) Peer popularity, Psychological well-being (emotional symptoms)
(Nagy et al., 2019)	Subject area (science, mathematics, reading) Gender, Migration background, Economic index, Parents' occupation, School track, Proportion of students with a migration background	Position effects (PEs) and test scores in science, mathematics, and reading

(Obinna & Ohanian, 2020)

Gender,
Race/ethnicity,
Immigration status,
Region of country of registration of immigration,
Urbanicity,
Amount of high schools the student has attended,
Family income,
Experience of pregnancy,
School safety,
Good grades,
Engagement with teachers and counselors about future plans
Parental interaction with school administrators,
Difficulties due to language barriers, Parental immigration status, Parental marital status,
Family income,
Parental level of education,
Parental engagement in children's education)

Drop out

(Owens & Lynch, 2012)

Immigrant generation,
academic effort
Dispositional Susceptibility to Identity Threat,
Stereotype externalization,
Stereotype internalization
(control) demographic characteristics (sex, the number of siblings in one's childhood household, two parent/care-taker household)
family socioeconomic status (parental educational attainment, percent of college paid for by family, mixed-race experience their racial identity)

Academic performance (Grades in College)
Additional outcome: Academic effort

(Paat, 2015)

Educational aspiration
Desired to stay in school,
Aspired to graduate from college and beyond,
Two-parent household,
Family Cohesion

Focal Outcome: Scholastic performance,
educational attainment,
Additional outcome: Aspiration attainment gap

(Park et al., 2012)	Technology use, Parent educational background, Academic aspiration, Self-confidence	Mathematic (Achievement) performance
(Patel et al., 2016)	Low income, Urban schools, Immigrants school experience, Acculturative language, Use of English language	Focal outcome: academic outcomes (GPA) Additional outcome: school attendance
(Perez-Izagirre, 2019)	Teacher's empathic attitude toward students Teacher-student interaction Teacher's authority Student's motivation and engagement Interaction and collaboration within group of students Trusting environment of the classroom Engagement and autonomy	Academic performance
(Pivovarova & Powers, 2019).	Students' generational status, Gender, Race/ethnicity, Parental education, An index of wealth, language other than English spoken at home, School and class size, student-teacher ratio, Teacher qualifications, Shares of students from different racial backgrounds and share of immigrant students, Poverty (presence of low income students), School climate, School sector(private/public), School location(urban, suburban, or rural)	Mathematics achievement

(Pomianowicz, 2021)	Degree of tracking in educational systems, Quality of school environments, Immigrant concentration in schools	Reading and literacy Performance
(Pong & Hao, 2007)	Nativity, and Ethnicity, Generation, Parental education, Household income, Family structure, Language used at home Neighborhood characteristics (Co-racial idle peers, Number of idle peers), Neighborhood SES(neighborhood SES, proportion of two-parent households, proportion of housing units moved into the neighborhood, relative educational status, proportion of foreign- born/ limited English proficiency (LEP)), Negative school climate, School type (public/private)	Academic performance (averaging self-reported grades for four subjects: English, math, science, and history/social studies)
(Pong et al., 2005)	Parenting styles, Decision making and sharing decisions with parents, Parents' responsiveness, Parental involvement, Parent-child communication, Social talk with parents, Parent education, Parent- children intergenerational closure, Parents' expectations) (control) Race/ethnicity, Generational status, Parental education, income, family structure	Academic performance (GPA) (Arithmetic of self- reported grade point in math, science and English)

(Portes, 1999)

Ethnicity, nativity and citizenship
Perceptions of their family's socio-economic status(SES),
Language of daily use,
Peer relationship;
Self-esteem,
Depressive symptoms,
Familism (family bond),
Acculturation(Americanism)
Grade,
Age,
English language proficiency,
maternal age,
Parental occupation,
Parental education)
Immigrant generation,
academic effort
Dispositional susceptibility to identity threat,
Stereotype externalization,
Stereotype internalization
(control) Sex,
The number of siblings in one's childhood household,
Two parent/care-taker household)
Parental educational attainment,
Percent of college paid for by family,
Mixed-race experience their racial identity)

School achievement (average of math and reading
standardized scores)

(Potochnick, 2018)	<p>Students' premigration schooling experience, Student's native language, Gender, Race/ethnicity, Student immigration at secondary-grade age Family income, Highest parent education, Biological parent, stepparent, single parent, Proportion on free/reduced lunch in the school, Proportion of minority students in school, Proportion limited English proficient population, Student-teacher ratio, Urbanicity of the school, Public/private school, Postmigration family resources, Postmigration school resources</p>	Academic performance (reading and math test scores)
(Razfar & Simon, 2011a)	<p>Mainstreaming (A student had mainstreamed if he or she had entered the regular college curriculum) Initial Educational Goal, Educational Background, Taking and Passing of Courses by Course Type, Success Rate, Initial ESL Level, English as Second Language levels progressed, Overall GPA, Overall Course Completion Rate</p>	Course completion, GPA
(Razfar & Simon, 2020b)	<p>Challenges to navigating the curriculum, English as second language (ESL), The supportive role of instructors</p>	Course completion and GPA

(Ream, 2003)	<p>Student mobility (number of times student changed school between 1st and 8th grade)</p> <p>Academically relevant teacher/student interaction (SSC1), and (b) school-initiated interaction with students' parents (SSC2))</p> <p>(control) Parental education,</p> <p>Income,</p> <p>Parental occupational status,</p> <p>Prior student mobility</p>	Academic achievement (mathematics and reading performance in cognitive tests)
(Reyes & Carrasco, 2018)	Language policy in bilingual context (of Catalonia)	Transition to upper secondary education, Early school leaving
(Roche & Kuperminc, 2012)	<p>Dimensions of acculturative stress (discrimination stress, immigration adaptation related stress),</p> <p>Age of immigration.</p> <p>School belonging.</p>	School achievement (school performance)
(Rodriguez, 2002)	<p>Non-immigrant/involuntary minority (children of immigrants) Enrollment</p> <p>Age,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>Place of birth,</p> <p>Parent nationality,</p> <p>Parents' education,</p> <p>Parents' occupation</p> <p>School racial composition,</p> <p>size of enrollment,</p> <p>proportion of students on government-subsidized lunch</p>	Academic Performance (GPA, math scores)
(Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016)	<p>Early educational tracking,</p> <p>Age,</p> <p>Gender,</p> <p>Books at home,</p> <p>Migrant status,</p> <p>Socioeconomic background</p>	Academic achievement

(Säävälä et al., 2017)	School-parent information sharing (Dependence of immigrant parents to the school because of language and knowledge disadvantage, Pressure of parents regarding the information, The immigrant youth's manipulation of information)	Focal Outcome: School achievement, Additional outcome: Identity formation, Early support,
(Schachner et al., 2021)	Equality and Inclusion Dimensions (Color-Evasion in classroom), Cultural Pluralism (polyculture approaches) Critical Consciousness)	Academic achievement (the grade on their last report cards)
(Schubert & Becker, 2010)	Household income, Parental educational level, Language used at home Migrant Background (use of the test language), Number of books and existence of a daily newspaper, Learning preconditions of the elementary students, School and the disciplinary climate in class (teaching and learning conditions), (control) Socially selective transition into the secondary school tracks(how social class influences the educational paths students take after elementary school).	Reading literacy, shift of competence level after the transition to the school tracks of secondary level.
(Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006)	Nativity status (foreign-born vs. native-born students), Gender, Age, Poverty, Language ability, Learning disabilities, Time of arrival into the school system, World region of origin, Prior performance, (control) School resources, school quality	Academic performance (Reading and math results)
(Seghers et al., 2019)	Parental occupation), Ethnic background)	Educational decision-making processes (parents' strategies and consideration in transitioning from primary to secondary education)(tracking)

(Seghers et al., 2021a)	Teacher guidance. Parents' expectations regarding teacher guidance, Teacher-parents' interactions	Educational decision-making (Track choice)
(Seghers et al., 2021b)	Parental Approaches (social and cultural capital), Complex Dynamics, Middle-Class Parents Working-Class Parents challenges navigating through the education system Educational and Immigrant Backgrounds	Educational decision-making (Track choice)
(Shapira, 2012)	Migrant status, Age, Gender, Age at arrival (for first-generation immigrants), Language spoken at home, Parental educational level, Parental occupational status, Home educational resources and possessions, Average study hours, Quality of teaching and technical resources, School size, The rate of student repetition, The level of school autonomy regarding resources and curriculum), Education systems; socio-economic development; welfare system; migration policy At national level	Math attainment (math test score)

(Song, 2011)

Parental education level,
Parental occupation status,
Gender,
Language,
Number of books at home,
School community,
Tracking,
Class size,
School size,
Instructional materials,
Computers in school,
Teacher supply,
Proportion of certified teachers,
Proportion of teachers with advanced degrees)

Math, reading, and science scores

(Šori et al., 2011)

Type of immigration,
Immigrant background,
Socioeconomic status,
Social and cultural status,
Language spoken at home,
Language proficiency,
Students' attitude towards learning and learning strategies,
Contextual factors related to old and new democracies

Reading proficiency (Reading Achievement), Math
and Science score

(Spees et al., 2016)

State immigration status (new immigrant destination states vs. established immigrant destination states),
Ethnic/racial group,
English language skills,
Age,
Sex
Parental education,
Student's eligibility for FRL (free and reduced-price lunch),
Use of English at home,
School resources,
Immigrant-specific resources in schools,
Proportions of white,
Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American students,
School target of Title I funds (most disadvantaged schools), Urbanicity—city, rural, and suburban,
Teacher's years of experience,
Students' teachers targeted non-standard teaching certifications

Academic Achievement (Math and reading test score)

(Tjaden, 2017)

Immigrant background,
Idealistic aspirations regarding the attainment of the university entry,
Parental university expectations,
(control) Age,
Gender,
German and math grades,
School type (Track),
Socio-economic background,
German language comprehension skills,
Opportunity structure (regional VET market types, federal states).

Academic track (Status one year after leaving lower secondary education)

(Tovar-García, 2017a)	<p>Perseverance and passion for long-term goals</p> <p>Parental education, Professional status,</p> <p>Family income,</p> <p>Number and types of books at home,</p> <p>Familiar relationships, and other related indicators.</p> <p>school participation in school Olympiads,</p> <p>Specialization in particular subjects,</p> <p>Especial educational and teaching methods</p>	Educational outcomes and trajectories (grades by subject, participation in academic activities, and study plans)
(Tovar-García, 2017b).	<p>Migrant background</p> <p>(control) Objects in possessions and if used by other family members,</p> <p>School type (public/private),</p> <p>Child's health,</p> <p>Child's gender,</p> <p>BIG_CITIES (school location)</p>	Educational outcomes (school grade)
(Tseng, 2006)	<p>Immigration background,</p> <p>Generational differences,</p> <p>Social and economic aspirations,</p> <p>English skills,</p> <p>Perceived English skills</p>	Educational choice (courses with math and science content)

(Tuppat et al., 2016)	<p>Migration background, Child's enrollment at a school with a reformed school enrollment procedure, Developmental problems (Reasoning, Behavior, Word completion, Articulation, Motor skills), Psychosocial risk factors: long-term parental unemployment, receipt of social welfare benefit, single-parenthood, poor nutritional or hygiene status (child), non-compliance regarding preventive medical care, or mental illness of parents or siblings; Low preschool attendance, (control) Gender, Age, Chronic health problems, Year of intended enrollment, social area differentiation(administrative district)</p>	<p>Admission to DSE (delayed enrollment) or regular school</p>
(Turjanmaa& Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020)	<p>Adolescent-reported parental knowledge Anxiety, (control) Gender, generational status, immigrant background, Parental education, Parental employment status, Family composition</p>	<p>Adaptation outcomes: Anxiety and school achievement (Measured in terms of school achievement among adolescents).</p>
(Ulriksen et al., 2015)	<p>Immigrant generation status (nativity and generation) Mothers' and fathers' country of birth, Educational level, Income, parents' employment status, Number of siblings living in the home, Social Support (perception relationship with family, friends, classmates and teachers)</p>	<p>Grades (first language (Norwegian), second language (English), mathematics, and social sciences) and educational aspiration (Highest education plans)</p>

(Vakalahi, 2009)	Family relationships and dynamics, parental expectations, community and cultural duality, commitment to school, peer relations	Academic achievements (school outcomes) and drop out (Academic attainment)
(Van den Bergh et al., 2010)	Teachers' explicit prejudiced attitudes. Teachers' implicit prejudiced attitudes, Teacher expectations. (control) Highest level of education completed by the parents	Academic achievement of the students. (The students' most recent national standard text comprehension and mathematics test scores)
(van Welie et al., 2013)	Distance from home to school Percentage of non-western migrant students resident area characteristics (neighborhood mean income, employment, and level of schooling) neighborhood characteristics (demographics and urbanicity) Mean school SES (Socioeconomic Status) Pupil's Prior Achievement (Exam score of the school, Secondary School Quality Student ethnicity (Native Dutch vs. Immigrant)	Choice of a school other than the nearest school (Tracking)
(Vanlaar et al., 2014)	Initial Dutch language skills, Home language (control) Ethnic background, Parents' education level, Family income, Professional status, Prior performance (students' reading comprehension achievement (RC) at the end of third, fourth, and fifth grade), Gender, Month of birth, Cognitive ability, Group composition (total number of students in each class group, the proportion of low SES-students)	Learning gains in reading comprehension

(Vaquera & Kao, 2012)

Immigrant origin(nativity /Migration generation),
Region,
Gender,
Perceived academic attitudes of students' friend,
Perception of of school climate,
Child's age,
Parental education,
Family income,
Two/single/ stepparents parent,
Number of siblings,
People living in the home,
Parental aspiration for child
(control) Attitude and effort toward schoolwork,
Number of their total friends attend the same school,
Number of their friends have foreign-born parents,
The age at which their friends arrived at their current school

Academic achievement (math, Spanish language,
and Catalan language grade)

(Verhaeghe et al., 2018)

Student-level (Initial Dutch (local) language skills,
Students' reading comprehension achievement (RC) at the end of third, fourth and fifth
grade,
Gender,
Month of birth,
Cognitive ability,
Socioeconomic and ethnic background),
Parents' education level,
Family income and professional status,
Ethnic-cultural (home language)

Mathematic achievement

(Wang & Sakamoto, 2021)

Father and mother's years of schooling,
Parent styles,
(control) Percentage of ethnic population,
Percentage of ethnic population college educated,
Natural logarithm of median household income adjusted to 2010 dollars based on CPI-U,
Percentage of families of ethnic group below poverty level.
Number of siblings in the household,
Mother's age when she had the child,
Whether the child lived with both biological parents,
Parents participated in teacher-parent meetings and whether Parents volunteered in schools,
Students disrupt the learning process
Region of residence
Feeling safe at school,
(control) Parental household income,

Years of schooling by age 28 (later educational attainment)

(Warren, 1996)

Parents' education,
Parents' occupation,
Family income,
household structure,
Other family-background characteristics
English-language ability,
Migration history (adolescents in each ethnic group according to their migration histories from 1985 to 1990)
Ethnic group

Educational attainment (The number of years of schooling completed by adolescents)

(Weber et al., 2015a)	Immigration background, Residence culture identity strength, Ethnic Identity Strength, Explicit stereotype threat, Implicit threat condition, (additional measures) Domain identification, Feelings of belonging to the school, Bicultural identity integration (not analyzed further), Religious affiliation, Language(s) spoken at home, Socioeconomic status, Stereotype threat	Cognitive performance; Affective responses.
(Weber et al., 2015b)	Residence culture identity strength, (additional measures) Domain identification, Feelings of belonging to the school	Cognitive performance
(Zhang et al., 2022)	Fathers' and mothers' education, Socioeconomic Index (SEI) Score, Family home ownership, Parent-child educational expectations, Parent-child conflict, Parental school involvement Youth's educational expectations	Focal outcome: Adjustment outcomes: school performance (GPA), Additional outcome: Depressive symptoms in adolescence educational attainment in young adulthood

3.9 Discussion

The present narrative review identifies a growing body of literature that has explored the factors underlying the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. The study contributes to the complex socio-economic, cultural, and relational factors that contribute to disparities in academic performance, track choice, and attainment. In this narrative systematized review, we tried to follow the instruction of Prisma (Moher et al., 2009) ensuring a structured approach to study selection and synthesis. As result 132 quantitative and qualitative studies were included in the present review.

One of the primary strengths of this review is its inclusivity, as it encompasses studies from diverse disciplines and time periods. It is important to recognize that the studies included in this review represent a wide spectrum of methodological approaches and study populations, which reflect the diverse realities faced by immigrant students in Western countries.

The identified factors were heterogeneous across six macro-categories including SES, sociocultural status, relational factors, psychological factors, student's characteristics and community and environment characteristics. This review underscores the need for interdisciplinary research that integrates these categories and explores their interactions across different levels of analysis. As the following discussion demonstrates, there is a need for research that particularly considers the impact of psychological factors of the achievement gap across different countries and different migrant populations of students.

3.9.1 Studies Mainly Concentrated on SES Factors

Overall, across the literature the studies underscored the crucial role of family SES in achievement gap. Although many studies have aimed to identify other explanations and determinants for this gap, SES factors have become the the most cited factor due to their prominence in sociological research. However, much of this research has addressed SES factors in isolation (e.g., Becker and Klein, 2021) or considered their indirect effect on academic outcomes, by mediating or moderating the relationship between other factors and academic outcomes (e.g., Meunier, 2011; Ulriksen et al., 2015)

These studies often attribute the lower parental occupational status and, consequently, the reduced family income of immigrant families as reasons for limited access to cultural and educational resources (e.g., Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011; Jia, 2019). This finding is in line with previous studies in the literature (e.g., Bozick, 2007; Leppel, 2002) highlighting the need for policies and interventions at the level of community in order to improve the job opportunities for narrowing the socio-economic inequalities.

Additionally, research has emphasized that family composition, such as the presence of one or both parents, can influence the family's socio-economic status (e.g., Paat, 2015; Turjanmaa & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020). Moreover, the number of siblings may also affect access to or availability of educational resources (e.g., Figlio et al., 2017; Hou & Zhang, 2015). This aligns with the previous studies (e.g., Wolter, 2003) highlighting the need for practices of support for the immigrant students providing them a more stimulating environment with the access to cognitive material resources.

However, there are inconsistencies in the findings regarding the effects of parents' educational level on students' academic achievement. International reports and Italian statistical documents highlight that immigrant parents often do not have high levels of education, or the qualifications obtained in their country of origin are frequently not recognized in the destination country (ISTAT, 2023). As a result, immigrants often face significant disadvantages in accessing non-manual service and white-collar employment, both in the short term and throughout their careers (Kogan, 2018; Reyneri & Fullin, 2011). Some studies have linked lower levels of parental education to lower parental expectations (e.g., Lenkeit et al., 2015; Pong et al., 2007; Tjaden, 2017; Vakalahi, 2009) or students' educational aspirations (e.g., Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Hou & Zhang, 2015; Vaquera & Kao, 2012). Therefore, future studies may differentiate the population with the corresponding parental educational level.

In addition, most studies primarily focused on factors related to the students' characteristics, particularly migrant or ethnic background (e.g., Birkelund, 2020; Brinbaum & Lutz, 2017; Kihara, 2022; Rodriguez, 2002). Demographic factors, such as age, school grade, and gender, were also frequently addressed, often as control variables (e.g., Ruhose & Schwerdt, 2016; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006). Also finding of the previous studies and Italian and international reports indicated the disparities among immigrant students (Miur, 2023; OECD, 2015). These reports show also differences based on gender in performance and track choices. However, there are sometimes

inconsistencies in these findings showing higher performance and track choices for the disadvantaged groups. Such results in the literature are usually linked with cultural and ethnic differences (MIUR, 2019; MIUR, 2020).

Moreover, several studies focused on the community and environment, highlighting the key role of the policies in the host country and the school in academic achievement in student with migrant background (e.g., Beach et al., 2013; Pomianowicz, 2021; Reyes & Carrasco, 2018). Specifically, the number of times factors related to school diversity and socioeconomic context appear, underscores its importance in achievement gap (e.g., Celeste et al., 2019; Pivovarova & Powers, 2019). Additionally, the school quality and educational environment describes the influence of the access to the school resources in achievement gap. These findings are in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Tomul & Savasci, 2012). This highlights the need for policies which can guarantee the access and being eligible to more schools to improve the access to a higher quality of resources and a better integration of immigrant students through a diverse context.

3.9.2 Few Studies Considered the psychological and relational factors

This review aimed to identify more factors linked to the psychological and relational factors. However, the findings showed that only few studies considered the role of the psychological factors in academic achievement in students with immigration background (e.g. Becker & Klein, 2021; Dollmann, 2016; Helms-Lorenz & Jacobse 2008; Motti-Stefanidi, 2012; Verhaeghe et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2015). Also, not many studies focused on relational factors (e.g., Baker, 2017; Malecki & Demaray, 2006)

In particular, studies examining the role of self-concept in academic outcomes show inconsistent findings. While a few have focused on factors like academic self-concept, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, ability self-concept, school self-concept, and school self-image, these remain underexplored compared to other factors (e.g., Lauermann et al., 2020; Motti-Stefanidi, 2012). The limited research suggests a potential link between positive self-concept and improved academic performance, but results vary, and the mechanisms remain unclear. This inconsistency points to the need for more comprehensive research to better understand how different dimensions of self-concept influence student achievement.

Moreover, not many studies focused on the potential prediction power of psychological wellbeing in immigrant students on their academic success.

The existing research underscores the role of teachers' biases, beliefs, and attitudes in contributing to the achievement gap among ethnic minorities. However, there is a significant gap in studies examining this issue within the context of immigrant students' academic performance. This limited focus overlooks a critical factor that may be influencing the educational outcomes of immigrant students. Understanding how teacher biases specifically affect these students is essential for developing interventions that can help close the achievement gap and promote equitable educational opportunities. Future research should address this gap to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for immigrant students.

Although research consistently emphasizes the significant impact of the parent-child relationship on academic success, this factor is underrepresented in the literature concerning the immigrant achievement gap. This gap in research suggests a need for further exploration of how family dynamics specifically affect the educational outcomes of immigrant students. Understanding these relationships more deeply could offer valuable insights into potential interventions aimed at reducing achievement disparities in this population.

One key area is the lack of interdisciplinary research, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of how social, psychological, and educational factors interact in shaping academic outcomes for immigrant students. Furthermore, the scarcity of mixed-methods research limits our ability to explore these interactions in depth. Future studies should aim to adopt more interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approaches to capture the complexity of the achievement gap and its contributing factors. Additionally, more attention should be paid to the interactions at different levels of analysis (e.g., individual, family, school, and societal), as these interactions may help reveal critical mechanisms that influence academic outcome.

Lastly, the literature has predominantly focused on performance indicators of academic success (e.g., test scores, grades) and, to a lesser extent, on attainment measures (e.g., graduation rates, dropout rates). While attainment is often associated with university-oriented pathways, few studies have examined tracking during the transition to high school as a critical academic outcome. This gap is significant, as the high school transition, especially in tracking systems, can have long-term implications for students' educational trajectories and social mobility. More research is needed to explore how tracking decisions during this pivotal transition influence the academic success of immigrant students.

3.9.3 Limitations

While the methodological limitations of this narrative review are acknowledged, such as the absence of formal quality evaluations and meta-analysis, it is important to note that a notable strength of this narrative reviews is its inclusivity in synthesizing diverse research across disciplines and contexts. As highlighted in the Method section, the decision not to conduct a formal quality evaluation stemmed from the wide range of study designs, cultural contexts, and time periods included in the review. This heterogeneity made it impractical to apply a uniform assessment framework. Additionally, the exclusion of studies based on varying methodological or contextual standards would have resulted in a narrower, less comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the achievement gap. Future research should address this limitation by employing meta-analytical approaches to provide more quantifiable and evidence-based insights. By focusing on Western countries, the review captured the challenges faced by immigrant students across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. This broad scope allowed for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of the achievement gap, addressing issues specific to immigrant students in Europe and particularly in Italy. This emphasis highlights the importance of studying regional contexts to develop targeted insights, demonstrating the need for further research in specific geographical settings to better understand the Italian or broader European context. Lastly, a lack of consistent terminology across the reviewed studies complicates comparisons and synthesis. Establishing clearer and more consistent terminology would enhance the clarity and comparability of research findings moving forward.

3.10 Conclusions

This chapter utilized a systematized method to narratively review the literature on the factors underlying the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. The identified factors were heterogeneous, so the studies were grouped into six categories of factors identified across the pool. The six macro-categories included SES, sociocultural status, relational factors, psychological factors, student's characteristics and community and environment characteristics. The most salient factors were related to the students' ethnic background, followed by demographic characteristics such as student's previous performance. Another significant category included parents' educational level, occupation, and migrant or nativity status. Additionally, several studies addressed family income and family structure.

Among the relational factors, only a few studies addressed teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and biases. Additionally, various studies considered school diversity, socioeconomic context, school quality, and the educational environment. However, only a few studies focused on the impact of language policy and bilingual education, as well as socio-economic policy and educational systems.

Moreover, relatively few studies focused on psychological and relational factors. Specifically, there was a notable lack of research on psychological well-being, such as depressive symptoms or anxiety. Moreover, a gap emerged in studies concerning self-concept, highlighting an area that requires further investigation.

Additionally, there is a notable scarcity of interdisciplinary studies exploring the achievement gap. Furthermore, only a limited number of studies have examined the interplay of multiple factors and their combined influence on the achievement gap.

In the next two chapters, the aim is to examine the factors that seem to be less analyzed or where there are inconsistencies in the existing literature. This will involve a closer look at underexplored areas and addressing gaps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on the achievement gap among immigrant students.

CHAPTER 4

4. Identifying the underlying factors in context: A qualitative study with native and non-native students and their teachers in Italy

4.1 Background

The present study explores the multifaceted factors influencing the educational experiences of immigrant students. While disparities in academic outcomes and choices remain a focal point, this study also examines broader elements shaping these experiences. Prior research highlights the significance of relational factors (e.g., Dimitrova et al., 2016; Motti-Stefanidi, 2012), sociological, family, community, environmental, and educational systems (Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Paat, 2015; Potochnick, 2018; Vaquera & Kao, 2012). Additionally, factors such as language and school policies, socio-economic conditions, and systemic structures within education (e.g., Celeste et al., 2019; Drake, 2014; Linde & Löfgren, 1988) are pivotal in understanding these experiences.

The research has shown the critical role of educational aspirations (e.g., Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Hou & Zhang, 2015), teachers' guidance and potential bias, as well as their relationship with the students (e.g., Glock et al., 2013; Goodenow, 1993; Van den Bergh et al., 2010), parents knowledge and educational level and participation and their relationship (e.g., Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011; Pong et al., 2005; Säävälä et al., 2017; Seghers et al., 2021), also play a significant role, alongside the influence of peers on academic outcomes (e.g., Baker, 2017; Baysu & Phalet, 2012).

As in other European countries, such as France and Germany (Barg, 2012; Schnepf, 2002), Italian students receive formal orientation advice (Consiglio Orientativo) from their teachers in the final year of middle school to assist in selecting a suitable path within the secondary school system. Although these recommendations are not binding, and families and students are free to make independent choices, research suggests that teachers' guidance can strongly influence students' self-perceptions and shape how families view the risks and opportunities of each school track (Cicourel & Kitsuse 1963; Nash 1976; Perino & Allasino 2014). The literature on educational outcomes among immigrant students has predominantly centered on generalized insights from

Western countries. In contrast, the Italian context requires a closer examination of the factors that influence the experiences of immigrant students.

In the school year 2021/22 Italy's public-school population consisted of 872.360 students with a migrant background, representing 10.6% of total student population in Italy. The number of foreign-born students with non-Italian citizenship decreased by nearly 5,000 in the 2021/2022 school year compared to the previous year, while the number of non-Italian students born in Italy grew substantially, adding almost 12,000. Over the past five years, the number of Italy-born non-Italian students has reached 27,232 in lower secondary schools and 42,666 in upper secondary schools (MIUR, 2023).

Research on the educational experiences of students with immigrant backgrounds has consistently underscored the various disadvantages they face (Heath et al., 2008; Levels & Dronkers, 2008). In Italy, as in other European countries (Borgna & Contini, 2014), students of foreign origin are disproportionately represented in vocational school tracks (Azzolini, 2011; Farina et al., 2009), a trend that correlates with higher dropout rates, grade retention, and lower academic performance (Ricucci, 2010) limiting their opportunities for higher education and long-term socio-economic mobility (Ballarino & Checchi, 2006). Understanding these patterns is crucial for identifying systemic barriers that perpetuate inequity and hinder the full integration of immigrant students into the educational system.

Few qualitative studies have examined the academic experiences of students or teachers in Italy particularly regarding academic pathways and outcomes. For example, Santagati (2021) explored the educational success of immigrant-origin students in northern Italy, despite structural disadvantages, through autobiographies of 65 students. The study identified three key strategies students use to navigate their educational paths, standing out, working hard, and waiting, varying by generation. Second-generation students often use their ethnic identity competitively, which can create pressure and isolation. While 1.5-generation students focus on resilience and honoring parental sacrifices, believing in equal opportunities yet often unaware of systemic barriers. Students from the 1.25 generation adopt a hopeful, meaning-focused outlook, which can be uncertain, particularly for recent arrivals.

Dusi and Gonzalez-Falcon (2018) examined the experiences of second-generation migrants in Italy, focusing on how schools, family, and social policies shape their transition to adulthood. Using a phenomenological approach, they conducted 25 in-depth interviews with young adults

from migrant families. The study found that many second-generation immigrant students feel isolated due to their perceived "differentness," with schools and social policies often reinforcing segregation. Inadequate support in L2 acquisition, outdated curricula, and insufficient teacher training hinder academic success. Schools frequently adopt a "compensatory approach," viewing cultural diversity as a problem rather than an asset. Additionally, experiences of non-recognition affect their identity development, prompting some to create cultural associations for expression and advocacy.

Building upon the language barriers and school policies, a study by Ghirotto (2012) investigated the educational experiences of migrant students in Italian schools, focusing on how language barriers create unequal starting points. This study used the Amartya Sen's Capability Approach which frames educational equity as the freedom to achieve one's full potential, and Social Justice Education to assess whether Italian schools truly support the right to education for all. It assesses if Italian schools genuinely uphold the right to education. Using Grounded Theory Methodology, interviews with teachers, principals, and instructors of Italian as a Second Language in Northern Italian schools revealed that, despite efforts to integrate migrant students, limited resources and systemic challenges hinder these initiatives. This often contributes to high dropout rates.

Another study by Bonizzoni et al., (2014) involving teachers and headmasters from schools in Milan in interviews, investigated how guidance practices often steer immigrant-origin students toward vocational over university-oriented tracks with data on student recommendations. The study showed that foreign-origin students face biases rooted in teachers' perceptions of their cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic limitations. Additionally, Italian families are more likely to advocate for ambitious tracks, while immigrant families, often unfamiliar with the system, accept teachers' advice without challenge.

4.2 Problem Statement

Despite efforts to improve inclusivity in the Italian education system, significant disparities persist for students with an immigrant background, as highlighted in chapter one and three of present dissertation. These students encounter systemic barriers that hinder their academic potential, resulting in lower educational attainment, higher dropout rates, and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Data from the Ministry of Education (2021) illustrates that 29.9% of students with non-Italian citizenship experience delayed schooling, a stark contrast to 8.9% among their

Italian peers. This delay often stems from late school placement upon arrival, grade repetition, or both. Furthermore, while immigrant-origin students are present across all secondary school tracks, they are disproportionately represented in vocational and technical pathways. Many are channeled into these tracks due to teacher recommendations, which, though non-binding, strongly influence student and family decisions (e.g., Azzolini & Barone, 2013; Mantovani, 2008; MIUR, 2022). These recommendations, often, fail to reflect the students' full potential, further limiting their academic and career trajectories. (e.g., MIUR, 2022; MIUR, 2023; Mussino & Strozza, 2011). Compounding these challenges are broader systemic issues. Approximately 10.0% of immigrant-origin students do not continue their education beyond lower secondary school. Among 17–18-year-olds, school enrollment rates for immigrant-origin students are eight percentage points lower than their Italian peers, highlighting non-linear educational pathways and early dropouts. The NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate is similarly concerning, with 33.5% of immigrant-background youth aged 15–29 falling into this category, compared to 22.5% of their Italian counterparts.

Moreover, schools with high concentrations of immigrant-background students often face challenges related to segregation and resource allocation. In metropolitan and peripheral areas, processes of social and ethnic segregation are evident, with Italian families opting for schools with fewer immigrant students ("White Flight," Politecnico di Milano, 2017). These dynamics exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder efforts toward integration.

It is important to highlight that the selection of a school track is a decision made by students and their families without the backing of a standardized national guidance system. Although orientation activities do exist, they are primarily dependent on the initiatives of individual schools or the efforts of guidance coordinators and specific teachers within the students' classes (Santangati & Colussi, 2020).

Substantial research has examined the educational challenges faced by immigrant students in Italy, focusing on individual barriers, such as language proficiency, or systemic factors, including guidance practices that disproportionately steer students toward vocational tracks. Most of these studies rely on quantitative data or consider either students' or teachers' perspectives in isolation, thereby overlooking the nuanced, intersubjective experiences that shape academic trajectories. Little attention has been given to the complex interactions between immigrant and native students

during pivotal transition points, such as the selection of educational tracks. By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study aims to fill these gaps, offering a comprehensive understanding of how students and teachers navigate this critical phase. This perspective seeks to illuminate the interplay of systemic, relational, and individual factors influencing school trajectories, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by immigrant students in Italy.

4.3 Present Study

This study aims to examine the critical transition from lower secondary to upper secondary school in Italy, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of immigrant-origin students. By integrating the perspectives of both students and teachers, it seeks to uncover the factors that influence track placement decisions and shape educational trajectories. Emphasis will be placed on faithfully representing participants' lived experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of how systemic, relational, and individual factors interact during this transitional phase. The research aims to illuminate both the supportive structures, and the barriers encountered by students as they navigate this pivotal juncture in the Italian educational system.

4.3.1 Hypotheses and Research Questions

The study is driven by the following principal research question:

What are immigrant students' perceptions regarding their experience of track choice while transitioning from lower secondary school to higher secondary school in Italy?

In addition to this central question, the following sub-questions and hypotheses will guide the inquiry:

1. **RQ1:** What are the difficulties they encounter in this decision making?
2. **RQ2:** Who are the figures influencing the track choices?
3. **RQ3:** What are the practices and instruments facilitating the tracking?

4.4 Method and Procedure

As qualitative approach fundamentally empirical phenomenological-eidetic method was utilized (Husserl, 2002; Moustakas, 1994), focusing primarily on participants' lived experiences of these phenomena. The sample was purposefully recruited from a specific middle school in Verona with the highest concentration of migrant and low-income students.

According to regional statistics, Verona has the largest foreign population in Veneto, with over 115,000 residents of foreign origin as of 2021, accounting for 12.4% of the total population, the highest proportion in the region. Regarding students, the Veneto region has a significant presence of foreign students, with approximately 14.1% of its school population holding non-Italian citizenship during the 2020/21 academic year. In Verona, this percentage is particularly notable in schools serving areas with high immigrant populations (Osservatorio Regionale Immigrazione, 2023).

In Verona, the total number of students in the 2022/23 school year is 129,266, with 22,183 students (17.2%) having a non-Italian citizenship (CNI¹). Among them, a significant proportion is represented by migrant students in various stages of education. Specifically, in lower secondary education², 16.9% of students are CNI, equating to 4,586 students. In upper secondary education³, 12.0% are CNI, or 4,711 students. The distribution of these students across different school tracks reveals notable patterns. In lyceums (licei), migrant students account for 7.4% (1,402 students), in technical institutes (istituti tecnici) 14.9% (2,108 students), and in vocational schools (istituti professionali), the percentage rises to 18.1% (1,079 students). Additionally, in professional training programs (percorsi di istruzione e formazione professionale)⁴, CNI students make up 31.9% (122 students). These figures highlight the educational path choices and the degree of integration within each educational track (Albertini, 2024).

Given Verona's significant migrant population, it is crucial to examine the challenges and experiences of adolescents during these formative years. The data from the 2022/23 school year highlight disparities and opportunities in the education of migrant youth, with Verona serving as a key context for understanding their lived experiences during this transitional phase.

One major consideration throughout this work is that data were collected in November and December 2022, during the typical period when the orientation procedure is ongoing in Italian schools.

¹ As referred to in the data of the Italian Ministries, CNI stands for "Cittadinanza non-Italiana" (Non-Italian Citizenship). <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Ricerca-news/Dettaglio-news/id/3923/MIM-nelle-scuole-italiane-914860-alunni-stranieri-piu-dell11-del-totale>

² Scuola secondaria di I grado

³ Scuola secondaria di II grado

⁴ As referred to in Italian: Licei (lyceums), Istituti tecnici (technical institutes), Istituti professionali (vocational schools), Percorsi di istruzione e formazione professionale (professional training programs).

The data for this study were collected from four different sources: four focus groups with third-grade students from lower secondary schools, one focus group with the head teachers, three individual interviews with the head teachers, and one interview with the guidance counselor.

4.4.1 The Empirical Phenomenological-Eidetic Method

The research approach adopted for this study is the empirical phenomenological method, which is recognized as particularly appropriate for exploring individual experiences and perspectives (Mortari, 2007; Mortari, 2010; Mortari et al., 2023). This method focuses on participants' lived experiences, emphasizing how individuals perceive and interpret phenomena within a shared intersubjective context (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010).

Grounded in Husserl's philosophy, EPM distinguishes between eidetic sciences, which identify general essences, and empirical sciences, which explore specific, contextual attributes (Husserl, 2012). In phenomenological research, the aim is to rigorously investigate the underlying nature or "essence" of experiences, engaging deeply with phenomena as they are revealed through individual perceptions, maintaining faithfulness to the phenomenon itself (Giorgi, 2003; Husserl, 1982; Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010).

Phenomenology seeks to understand experiences as they are perceived, distinct from postmodern social constructivism, which views reality as co-constructed by consciousness and language (Giorgi, 2007). The *eidetic essence*, according to Husserl (2012), refers to the universal, invariant qualities shared by all instances of a concept, distinct from the *material essence*, which includes unique, context-specific attributes that appear in individual manifestations. While eidetic phenomenology seeks to understand these universal attributes, empirical science explores the particular, contingent qualities of real-world instances. In essence, empirical inquiry aims to capture concrete, diverse manifestations of experiences to build knowledge grounded in the variety of reality, moving beyond abstract generalizations (Mortari et al., 2023).

Husserl (2012) noted that phenomena are often partially visible and require examination from multiple perspectives. This gradual observation involves attention, the core cognitive act of phenomenology, guided by two principles: *evidence*, where inquiry remains limited to observed qualities, and *ulteriority*, which urges exploration beyond immediate appearances. Engaging in *epoché*, or suspension of preconceptions, enables the researcher to grasp both evident and hidden aspects of the phenomenon authentically.

Moustakas (1990), Dahlberg (2006), Van Manen (1990), and Karlsson (1993) each offer distinct interpretations of phenomenology: Moustakas emphasizes the heuristic approach, balancing researcher reflection and participant experiences through creative synthesis; Dahlberg integrates essential meanings with particularities, advocating an "open and bridled" attitude; Van Manen focuses on hermeneutic phenomenology and the "lifeworld," while Karlsson explores the "meaning structure" of phenomena through detailed consciousness analysis.

The Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM) builds upon the theoretical foundation of empirical phenomenology to investigate lived experiences in the human sciences. It seeks to bridge the gap between universal essences and individual experiences by first identifying the phenomenon's eidetic essence, which encompasses its core and invariant characteristics. Importantly, the distinction between eidetic and empirical sciences does not signify a separation in the investigative process; instead, research on general essences provides a critical framework for orienting inquiries into specific, lived experiences.

After defining the eidetic essence, EPM employs heuristic techniques and methodological principles to analyze data systematically. The primary analytic outcome of this process is a "bunch" of essences, which reflects the diversity and particularity of the phenomenon under study. While some essences cannot be universally categorized due to their singularity and unique context, they still offer valuable insights. This approach also acknowledges that the purely eidetic essence—central to philosophical inquiry—cannot be fully captured through empirical research. EPM organizes these essences hierarchically, resulting in an inductively derived framework that highlights the contrast between empirical phenomenology, focused on concrete experiences, and eidetic phenomenology, aimed at universal generalizations. Ultimately, the EPM produces a descriptive theory of the phenomenon, grounded in lived experiences. While this theory does not claim universal applicability, its strength lies in faithfully reflecting the nuances and authenticity of the collected data (Mortari et al., 2023).

While philosophical phenomenology seeks universal attributes, EPM emphasizes the empirical exploration of lived experiences, resulting in a descriptive theory grounded in concrete data. This process generates a "bunch" of essences, organized hierarchically, reflecting the diversity of reality. Although this descriptive theory may lack the abstraction required for universal generalizations, its strength lies in its empirical grounding (Mortari et al., 2023).

These principles, shared with approaches like content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017), grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2021), result in a "bunch" of essences, ordered from specific to general or vice versa.

As previously noted, only a limited number of studies, such as those by Dusi et al. (2014) and Dusi and Gonzalez-Falcon (2018), have employed the Empirical Phenomenological Method (EPM) to investigate the experiences of immigrant students in Italy. However, the literature reveals a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences of teachers working with immigrant students in the Italian context.

4.4.2 Sample

Participants: 29 native and non-native and native Italian students of two third grade classes of lower secondary school who were involved in the orientation have been recruited for four Focus Groups. Also, five head teachers (coordinator professor of the class) were selected for a Focus Group. Additionally, three head teachers and the orientation professor who helps the students during orientation have been interviewed.

The sample comprises 29 students with an average age of 13 years old, from the third grade of lower secondary school. both male (53.3%) and female (43.3%). The group included both Italian students (77.0%) and those with immigrant backgrounds (63.3%). Among participants, 77.0% of students were born in Italy while 20% were first generation immigrants. Those born abroad have varied arrival ages, spanning early childhood to recent years. The students with immigrant backgrounds had parents from a variety of countries. 23% were from Eastern Europe (with Moldova having the highest representation), 20% were from Arab and African countries, 17% were from Asia and the Middle East, 27% were Italian, and 3% were from other regions.

Additionally, nine headteachers participated in focus groups and interviews. All the teachers were female, with the majority being married and an average age of 45.5. Their educational qualifications ranged from a bachelor's degree to a Ph.D., with some holding a master's degree, and a few pursuing combined Master's and Doctoral-level qualifications. On average, the teachers had 17.5 years of teaching experience.

All participating teachers were headteachers of the third grade in lower secondary school and were directly involved in teaching the two classes selected for the student focus groups. Among these teachers was the school's guidance counselor. Participation was voluntary, except for one support

teacher who was recruited through snowball sampling following the withdrawal of a previously selected participant.

4.4.3 Instrument

Before the individual and group interviews, all participants completed a brief questionnaire collecting socio-demographic information. Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were developed based on insights from qualitative studies included in the literature review according to key themes, outcomes, and findings identified from the literature (see Chapter 3).

The open-ended questions explored various topics, including students' interests, parental expectations, adherence to cultural values, language barriers, relationships, inclusion, orientation procedures, and perspectives on future success. The questions encouraged participants to share their experiences with the high school decision-making process, their outlook on the transition, and their perspectives on the future. Table 4.1 provides details about the studies and the main topic of each article.

Table 4.1 Overview of Studies and Key Topics Related to Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups Development

Citation	Theme	Academic outcome
Chhuon et al., 2010	Traditional cultural values and immigrant ethnic minority students': Parents' expectation, Parents' low level of language, the student's ability, the student's difficulty, Family cultural values, Teachers' attitude/inspiration toward student's future, Students influenced by less oriented peers	Performance and track choice
Haxton, C. (2011).	Parents familiarity with the educational system (Parents are not familiar with the American educational system), Parents language knowledge (Parents do not speak English), Parents with limited education (Parental education)	Track choice
Opland Stenersen et al., 2016	School expectations, ideal migrant student, Expectation of interaction with native peers, Linguistic deficiency, Spatial segregation, built on ethnicity	Performance
Perez-Izaguirre, 2019	Teacher's empathic attitude toward students, Teacher-student interaction, Teacher's authority, Student's motivation and engagement, Interaction and collaboration within group of students, Trusting environment of the classroom, Engagement and autonomy	Performance
Reyes & Carrasco, 2018	Peers, parents, cultural capital, Academic identity, Language policies	Performance
Säävälä et al., 2017	Culture and family diversity	Performance
Sattin-Bajaj, 2014	Socioeconomic status, parental nativity, ethnicity, peers	Track choice
Seghers et al., 2021	Classed patterns in the course and outcome of parent-teacher interactions: teacher guidance, parents' expectations regarding teacher guidance, Teacher-parents' interactions	Track choice

Note: N= 9 articles, consulted for the design of items of the semi-structured interviews

Representative questions for the students included the following: “How do you choose which high school to attend?”, “Are there any useful sources of information? What are they?”, “Is it a choice that puts you in difficulty?”, “Does anyone help you make this choice?”, “Do parents have a role in this choice?”, “At school does anybody help you understand what the best path for you after middle school might be?”

Representative questions for the teachers included the following: “Does your school offer courses to support students' school choices?”, “In your opinion, what are the factors (social status, linguistic competence) and the actors (parents, peers, teachers) that influence a student's school choice?”, “Are there similarities in the way Italian students and students of foreign origin in how they think about which school to choose or which high school they will go to after middle school?”, “What is the role of parents during orientation? In your opinion, are there similarities and differences between Italian and foreign students?”, “Do class teachers play a role in students' school choice? Directly and/or indirectly”; Regarding progress at school and academic performance, in relation to school choice: “Are there differences between Italian students and migrant students? Do you see any differences in the way students make school choices?”

Sample questions for orientation Professor included: “How are parents involved in the orientation process at your school?”, “In your experience, are there notable differences in how native and immigrant parents engage with the orientation process?”, “How does the *Consiglio d'Orientamento* influence students' decisions about their secondary school pathways?”, “How is the orientation process adapted for newly arrived immigrant students or those with schooling delays?”, “How frequently do students alter their track choices, and what impact does this have on their academic trajectory?”.

Interviews and Focus Groups lasted approximately 1 hr each. All group interviews were conducted in a private classroom in the school and audio-recorded. The individual interviews were carried out and recorded *remotely* via Zoom.

4.4.4 Research Procedure

The interviews have been recorded following privacy and ethical considerations. To ensure privacy and uphold ethical standards, each interview and focus group was conducted by an interviewer and a moderator, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. To maintain data anonymity, codes were assigned to each participant. These codes included an abbreviation of the research title, the participant's

role, and a unique number. The analysis method followed the guidelines of the empirical phenomenological approach, aimed at deeply exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Mortari, 2007 & 2010). Transcriptions were organized into separate tables for each of the four focus groups. Alongside each participant's statement, unique codes were assigned to identify the speaker and turn order, preserving anonymity for each participant. The coding system included an abbreviation for the project name, followed by indicators for the type of session: "FG" for focus groups and "INT" for interviews. Each code was followed by a number that was assigned to the participants based on their seating order during data collection. Additionally, participant roles were denoted by specific letters: "S" for students, "D" for *Docente* (teacher), and "DR" for *Docente Referente* (guidance counselor). This system ensured clear traceability of responses while maintaining confidentiality. The analysis was carried out collaboratively by the researcher and an independent reviewer to enhance rigor and reliability.

First, an individual, detailed reading of the transcripts was conducted, immersing in the students' perspectives and identifying elements relevant to the research question. An initial attempt was made to grasp the overall sense of the data and then focused on identifying significant statements related to participants' experiences.

Next, meaningful text units were isolated, and eventually less relevant content was excluded. The meaningful units comprise those segments contributing insights into the phenomenon under study. Each significant unit was condensed into a synthetic description and assigned a conceptual label. These labeled descriptions were then grouped into meaningful units, allowing patterns to emerge. The final phase involved synthesizing these patterns into a comprehensive summary, providing a clear and accurate representation of the participants' experiences, as consistent with the Empirical Phenomenological approach (Polkinghorne, 1989).

In crafting the labels, certain criteria were taken into consideration, such as the classification by Rumbaut (1997) regarding the immigration generation of students, into three categories:

- The 2.0 generation includes those born in the country after their parents' arrival.
- The 1.75 generation refers to those who migrated during early childhood, specifically before the age of six, when socialization primarily occurs within the family.
- The 1.5 foreign-born youths who migrated to the host country before age 12.

- The 1.25 generation includes adolescents who migrated between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, often experiencing significant cultural and educational adjustments during their teenage years.
- The first generation includes individuals who are born in the host country to immigrant parents.

Other codes used to identify the young students who participated in the four focus groups were:

- *s.n* = native student, identifying those born in Italy to Italian parents;
- *n.s* = not specified, for those whose origin information could not be determined;
- *s.w.m.b* = student with a migratory background, for those whose migration age information was unavailable.

A table was initially created to include the labels derived from the interview texts, along with precise references to the corresponding text units. Next, these labels and their associated units were transferred to a new table, where a relabeling process was undertaken to refine the labels and improve the categorization of each unit.

This process was applied to all sessions from each data collection. Once the data from each group of participants was labeled, a new table including the corresponding units and references was created to cluster the labels into categories. Once the labels for all data collection sets were identified, categories were created to group similar labels or those addressing the same theme. Each category was defined with a more abstract representation. From these categories, we subsequently identified the main categories.

Table 4.2 example of a categorization table.

Code	EXCERPT	Labels	Category	MACRO-Category
FGS1/18-SSM2	Uh, I Really Like Basketball. I Continued Playing for Many Years, But I Stopped for School. I Was Overwhelmed and Couldn't Manage...	Personal Interests: Basketball (1.5 Gen = Immigrant Who Arrived in Italy At Age 5/6)	Sports Interests	Passions
FGS1/46/1-SSM7.	My Name Is Z. A., I'm 13 Years Old, And Uh, I Really Like Playing Soccer. I Play for Santa Lucia, The Santa Lucia Team.	Personal Interests: Soccer (2nd Gen = Second Generation, Born in Italy)		
FGS2/8-SSM2	I Am G., I'm 13 Years Old, And I Like Athletics and Sports in General.	Personal Interests: Athletics And Sports (N.S. = Native Student)		

As a result, codebooks were developed for each data collection, resulting in a total of four codebooks that compiled the categories and macro-categories from each collection. An example of codebook is provided in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Codebook from Focus Groups with Students

MACRO-CATEGORY	CATEGORY
LANGUAGES BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL	Language skills
	Language skills learned at home
	Language skills learned at school
SECONDARY SCHOOL	School organization
CONSIDERATIONS OF YOUNG STUDENTS	Human relations
	Student's reflections on their own school experience
	Passions and interests
ORIENTATION SERVICES	Orientation services offered by the secondary school Grade I
	Secondary school guidance services
	Guidance services of offered by the territory
THE CHOICE OF SCHOOL: PROCESSES AND PEOPLE	Uncertainties and difficulties in the school choice
	Social network in the process of school decision
	Elements motivating the choice
	Chosen school address

Note: $N = 5$ macro-categories, and $N = 18$ categories

4.5 Findings

Each set of focus groups and interviews was analyzed using a separate codebook, specifically tailored for each participant group. The codebooks contained codes representing recurring themes, patterns, and key insights drawn from the participants' discussions and responses. In the next section, the categories from the codebooks will be presented based on the research questions. First, the codebook related to the focus groups with the students will be analyzed, highlighting the core categories that emerged concerning the children's perspectives on their school experiences and their tracking processes in higher secondary school.

Next, the analysis of the focus groups with the headteachers will be presented, along with the combined analysis of the codebook for the interviews with three headteachers and the codebook for the interview with the guidance counselor. The categories captured the teachers' and counselor's experiences and perceptions, particularly regarding the schooling and orientation processes of immigrant students. This structure allows for a progression from the voices of the students, who are the primary subjects of the study, to the perspectives of the adults who support and shape their educational journey. In the next section, the results from each participant group will be analyzed in greater detail, beginning with the students' focus groups.

Next, the findings from all data collections will be compared and discussed.

4.5.1 Giving Voice to Students' Experience

The analysis of the focus groups conducted with third-grade students at a lower secondary school, during their orientation process, yielded four primary macro-categories. These categories reflect key themes arising from the students' experiences and perspectives:

-Languages between home and school,

-Secondary school: young students' considerations and orientation: the services offered by the institution,

-School choice: processes and people.

In the following sections, these categories will be discussed in the order of their prominence in the data, determined by the frequency and depth of their appearance during the focus groups. This approach ensures that the most salient aspects of the student's experiences are given appropriate emphasis.

School Choice: Processes and People

This macro-category comprises $n = 254$ significant units across four categories. It addresses themes related to the process of school choice and the figures influencing this process. These themes were categorized under the following categories: *students' uncertainties, the influence of their social networks, motivations behind their choices, and the educational tracks ultimately selected.*

- ***Uncertainty and Difficulty in School Choice***

The most salient theme in the students' narratives about their secondary school decisions aligns with the broader literature on career decision-making and educational transitions, particularly for immigrant-origin youth. As Gati and Saka (2001) suggest, career decision-making is a complex process that is often clouded by competing aspirations, external influences, and uncertainty about the future. Many students expressed indecision or were unsure about their educational track or specific institution.

I've chosen a technical path, but I'm undecided between the schools. I attended an open day at a technical institution and found it interesting, but I still need to check out another institute. (FGS1/26/1-SSM4)

Some students explicitly acknowledged the difficulty of making this decision, particularly because it was clouded by broader uncertainties about the future.

There are so many schools that seem interesting, and it's hard to choose. You have to think about the job you want in the future, but it's a lot to ask at this age since we're still young to understand what we want to do later. (FGS4/555-SSM9)

It's very difficult for me to choose between an economics track at a technical institute and a high school lyceum. For me, the lyceum is following a childhood dream, but I always have to think about the future, that is, finding work that could support me well financially. So, there are two paths... (FGS4/558-SSM9)

Even when students knew the general type of school they wanted, uncertainty persisted, often due to conflicting career aspirations. For example, one student struggled between pursuing mechanics or dental technology, influenced by both personal interests and teacher recommendations. For instance, one student expressed indecision about which type of technical program to pursue, torn between mechanics and dental technology choices influenced by both teacher advice and personal interest (FGS3/245/2-SSM1).

- ***Social Network in the School Decision Process***

Data from the focus groups with students highlighted how interactions with parents, peers, and teachers, including the teacher referred to as the guidance counselor, influence their orientation decisions. A native student mentioned discovering a school through multiple sources and people, combining recommendations from teachers, their mothers, and acquaintances who had attended the school (FGS1/221-SSM1).

Some students emphasized the parents and teachers as key sources of support. Additionally, they suggested that certain people who have already knowledge and experience about the school choice process or high schools in the decision-making process. The students highlighted that they received help from orientation professor, teachers, parents and former students. A student with a migration background commented on family and teacher involvement, noting how a subject teacher influenced their perception of school difficulty, cautioning them against choosing certain schools they had initially considered easier (FGS4/528-SSM2).

Some students felt uncertain about their school decision, according to them due to limited teacher support. They perceived a lack of specific support as they received help only if they'd ask.

The school, the teachers didn't really help me that much, because they didn't ask me, except for the fact that Professor of the math and science teacher, said that in applied sciences, you don't have a life after school and you have to study a lot, so it didn't help much. (...) generally, I checked at home. (FGS1/435-SSM4)

In contrast, some native students found some teacher's guidance helpful to recognize their deeper interests, some students described the guidance confusing especially when different teachers expressed different opinions. Here examples of two Italian native students' perceptions about the teachers' guidance.

When I had a meeting with the math teacher, she helped me because sometimes maybe, I don't recognize it, my real passions and so I didn't really know what to do. And also, maybe the Italian teacher didn't... I mean indirectly because maybe at the beginning I did some exercises about our passions and our interests and there I really defined my passions in what I wanted to be interested in, but they weren't really my real passions. (FGS3/368-SSM6)

In contrast, the other student describes her positive opinion about the activities and exercises but also her confusion regarding the orientation guidance she received in meeting with the teacher:

Well, to me in some circumstances, because, as AM. said, the exercises we did maybe helped me to find out how I was more convinced, but during the interviews, one teacher said that I better go to the scientific one, another one in the class, um, they confused my ideas. (FGS3/377-SSM6)

The students also highlighted the role of the formal recommendation of the Guidance Council (Consiglio Orientativo) in their decision about the higher secondary school. They sometimes explained that they prefer relying on the recommendation of the orientation council. This reliance

is especially pronounced among students with migration backgrounds, aligning with findings from Cicciarelli (2019), which emphasized that immigrant students and their families are particularly in need of guidance when navigating new educational systems, especially during critical junctures such as choosing the first cycle of schooling and selecting a secondary school. As an example, a 1.5 generation with recent migration experience expressed her reliance on teachers and formal orientation advice (Consiglio Orientativo) expressing uncertainty and waiting for guidance to determine the best educational path (FGS2/188-SSM4).

Some students also indicated that they sought help outside school for instance they sometimes perceive help and guidance from the external sources and teachers which follow them in After-school programs where educators provided guidance on school selection and performance improvement (FGS4/534-SSM8).

Students highlighted the impact of parents' experience of high school in their decision making. Participants reported that sometimes parents may collect information in their social network for their children. This was majorly reported by native students.

The high school F, for example, my mother recommended it to me because practically, in their group of friends, one of their friend's sons also goes to high school F; he found it very well (FGS3/307/1-SSM1)

Students often highlighted the positive impact of parental involvement on their school decision-making process, especially in cases where parents actively supported information gathering or helped them explore potential career paths (FGS1/374/2-SSM3).

Some students shared that their parents lacked the specific knowledge required to guide them directly, often due to unfamiliarity with the high school options or academic tracks. To bridge this gap, they described how they or their parents took the initiative, gathering information independently or encouraging them to reflect on their own skills and areas of interest (FGS2/213-SSM5, FGS3/323-SSM4).

The impact of parent-child interaction and communication on academic outcomes was studied by Pong et al. (2005). Both immigrant and native students found it valuable when parents encouraged self-reflection and prompted them to think critically about their choices, as they noted that thoughtful discussions with their parents can simplify the decision-making process. For instance, one student explained how conversations with his parents helped him reach a decision.

My family and I started talking this summer about what I wanted to do after middle school. First, my dad told me in his opinion what I should do, which is the computer world of the internet that is because you go into the future, the internet you go into the future. So, we started to consider that technology, but I mean I didn't care as long as I did something I liked. And then that is, so in my opinion they helped me to choose, and it was a choice of what I was going to do that mattered. (FGS1/376-SSM2)

As discussed in the previous chapter, research has shown the impact of parents' positive feedback (Lenkeit et al., 2015). For many of the interviewed students, parental support was crucial, even when parents contributed indirectly, through encouragement or simply by respecting the student's autonomy. One student emphasized the value of parental feedback, noting how their parents' belief in their abilities, such as in cooking, served as important validation (FGS1/380-SSM1).

The research indicated the parents' expectations significantly influence children's academic outcomes (Lenkeit et al., 2015; Pong et al., 2007; Tjaden, 2017; Vakalahi, 2009). One student shared how his mother's strong desire for him to become a doctor created some tension (FGS4/659-SSM2).

Some students discussed how the differing approaches of the two parents influenced their decision-making. For instance, one student shared that the father's more relaxed attitude contrasted mother's stronger concerns about choosing the right school, reflecting her desire to avoid wasting time and her personal aspirations for the student's future.

My dad is OK with everything, as long as I go to school. Instead, my mum maybe cares more that I choose a suitable school instead of wasting years of my life. Let's say though my mum forces me in some way to go to N. high school because she also wanted to go. (FGS4/643-SSM9)

For some students, parental support extended to giving them freedom and autonomy in making the final decision, respecting their individual preferences. This sense of independence was seen as both empowering and confidence-boosting, as students valued having their parents trust their judgment. One student shared,

My mum and dad have always supported me too. They told me that the most important thing is a school that makes me happy. And let's say that in my opinion, however, the opinion of parents should not go to influence what we are

we want a school to do; parents don't want for maybe because we are interested in something else there is everyone has to do what they want. (FGS4/654-SSM1)

Conversely, a few students felt that their parents' opinions weighed heavily in the decision-making process, indicating that shared discussions, while helpful, sometimes placed additional pressure on their choice (FGS4/649-SSM5).

The parents' network has been highlighted as a vital source of guidance for the participants as they had the chance to ask about the quality of people's experience in a long-term perspective (FGS2/162-SSM1).

Research by Seghers et al. (2019) reveals that immigrant parents face challenges in educational decision-making due to limited social and cultural capital. Unlike native parents, who use social networks for information, immigrant parents often lack such access, and their educational and migration backgrounds add complexity to their choices. This dynamic was echoed in the focus groups conducted for this study.

Students with an immigrant background highlighted the significant role of family and community connections in their decision-making process. Often, second-generation students chose schools based on future job prospects aligned with careers common within their community. Many anticipated opportunities through the networks of adults in their community who could support them later on. These considerations frequently influenced their preference for vocational or technical institutes. One student, for example, explained:

Because the theory is not so useful and then also an uncle of mine has a salon here in this district and he kind of... that I liked it so I decided to be a hairdresser. (FGS1/243/2-SSM7)

Students with immigrant backgrounds indicated they were often guided not only by their parents but also by peers within their family's social network. Students from 1.5 and second generation of immigration noted that they've been helped and guided by their siblings or cousins in collecting concrete information about the schools and tracks or the identification of the high school. One second-generation student described how family members influenced their school choice, highlighting how their cousin encouraged them to attend an open day at a technical institute to better understand what it offered (FGS3/319/1-SSM4). Also, a 1.5 generation student mentioned receiving guidance from their older sister on school choices (FGS4/516-SSM3).

This support from peers extended beyond gathering information about schools to include examples of career paths pursued by both native and immigrant community members. In this regard particularly the native students shared experiences. For example, a native student explained how peers in family and siblings influence shaped their school decisions. For example:

Let's say, the choice to pursue a technical economic path was also strongly influenced by my older sister, who also attended a technical economic institute. Seeing where she is now, studying for her second degree, she really encourages me to take this route. She highly recommends it. (FGS3/316-SSM3)

Some students described how guidance from family members who had firsthand knowledge of specific schools could alter their initial preferences or open up new options for consideration. One student shared an experience where their initial idea to attend a different school was influenced by a cousin's experience as input (FGS4/423-SSM4).

Students also discussed the influence of friendships and the advice they received from friends on their high school choices. Notably one recently immigrated student shared how a conversation with a friend led her to reconsider her plans:

Around one year ago a friend of mine from the third year of middle school, with whom I was doing ballet, told me that there is a high school for dance, first I chose linguistic high school but I didn't know that there is high school for dance, so, I chose high school for dance as my first choice. (FGS2/139-SSM5)

- ***Motivating Factors for School Choice***

Students often noted the significance of a school's environment, particularly the attitudes of the teaching staff, as a key factor in their decision-making process. The perception of kind and supportive teachers contributed positively to how students viewed potential schools (e.g., FGS2/328-SSM1)

Participants often expressed a preference for schools that offered a practical approach to learning, especially when aligned with their career aspirations. Students with immigrant background often considered their future professional aspirations when choosing their educational track. A second-generation student described their decision to attend a technical institute, motivated by a desire for practical work experience:

I decided to go to a technical institution because I want to gain work experience afterward. Although I was unsure about the amount of studying required, (...), so I figured I could handle it. (FGS3/331/2-SSM8)

The student also highlighted the importance of self-research in their decision (FGS3/331/2-SSM8). During their search and exploration, students emphasized that they found reliable information in the experiences shared by peers currently attending various high schools. Some students highlighted this, saying,

In my opinion, the most useful thing for me is to meet the student who attends it. (FGS3/331/2-SSM8)

Once I focused well on the dental technician that they had already told me about and the second time on the chemist because the first time I had a student from that school who was in the fourth year she told me well about this school, about what is done in chemistry and so she gave me the passion let's say. (FGS3/335/2-SSM7)

My father has friends with children who, like me, have finished high school and are now at university. Some of them often tell me about what they did at F. High school. Then there are others who went to Fermi, which is connected but still separate. From what they said, at the beginning, they didn't know anything. (FGS4/382/1-SSM4)

Students emphasized the significant role of educational offerings and hands-on learning in their school choices. Some student reflected how during school open-days they considered if the learning program is focused on practical subjects rather than theoretical ones (e.g., FGS1/243/1-SSM7, FGS1/209/2-SSM2 & FGS1/196/2-SSM4)

I saw that I also liked the subjects someone told me (...)then I also saw the timetables and they told me that you don't study that much, so whatever, always better, I saw that there they do a lot of lab hours and use computers for a long time and I like it so I chose S. high school (FGS1/203/2-SSM3)

In addition to practical considerations, students often aligned their choices with personal strengths and interests.

The choice wasn't very difficult because I already knew I was quite good at scientific subjects, so I knew where to go. I chose Applied Sciences because it has more science than what is offered at the traditional science high school or the technical institutes. I looked at various technical schools, and that's the one I liked the most. (FGS1/260/1-SSM4)

I also thought about what kind of work I'd want to do and considered the science track. But I'm not very good at math, especially chemistry and those subjects, so I said, 'no, not for me. (FGS1/384/1-SSM1)

Teachers' recognition also influenced students' decisions. A second-generation student shared how teachers' praise for their artistic talent influenced their decision to pursue an art track, with teachers highlighting their potential for success in the field (FGS4/413/1-SSM4).

Some students were influenced by family experiences. For example, one second-generation student's interest in mechatronics was shaped by observing their father's work (FGS4/378-SSM2). Other students were inspired by representations of future careers in media. For example, one student explained how their track choice was influenced by an aspiration to join the business world:

I chose a commercial school because I watched movies where I saw many entrepreneurs and businessmen, and I liked them. It gave me the idea that I could be one of them, too. (FGS4/394-SSM3)

In some cases, practical concerns about future financial stability and social environments also influenced choices.

I chose the school that would first and foremost lead me to make a lot of money. I also picked a school that was a bit farther away because I didn't want to have the same classmates; I wanted to meet new people. And I chose it based on a dream that first came to mind. I believe that the things that come to mind first are the most important. (FGS4/443-SSM9)

- ***Selected Academic Track***

Students shared their decisions about future academic tracks, with both immigrant and native students expressing interest in professional institutions like graphic design, hotel management, and hairdressing.

I will do Electronics at the S. high school, because I saw all the things they have created—wiring systems, lights, the first setups they managed, and even recreating old video games on TVs..... (FGS3/271-SSM5)

I'll go to hotel management school and I'll do it at S. high school but in a different field—I'll do the field of cooking. (FGS1/219-SSM1)

As a school I would like to go to E. high school which is a technical institute with a major in Marketing. (FGS1/42-SSM6)

Technical school, then I will be an engineer. (FGS2/133-SSM3)

Notably, economic constraints and logistical challenges significantly influenced the decision-making process:

There are other schools but one in S neighborhood, it's a private school, but the teachers advised me that I could do it, but I said no, because my mother said no. Because she says...a lot. And then there are many that are too far away, as I said. No, I can't do it, I can't do it. Every morning take bus, three buses. (FGS4/475-SSM8)

I was thinking of doing commercial studies, at S. professional institute because I mean I know S. high school is that type of school, but it's the only one I could attend because the others are far away or private. I chose this school because I've always had a business idea, and I hope one day to have my own business. (FGS4/347-SSM8)

Some 1.5 generation students preferred a technical school, noting the flexibility it offered, allowing them to either work or continue studies at university. Some students also mentioned planning to attend a human sciences lyceum, which would have led directly to university (e.g., FGS2/147-SSM3; FGS4/345-SSM9).

Some migrant students chose lyceum tracks, including Scientific, Artistic, and Sports paths, reflecting aspirations shaped by career goals and school guidance. For example, a second-generation student expressed interest in scientific high school to pursue medicine, inspired by family role models.

So, I would like to go to a scientific high school. (...) Or because I like medicine anyway and I look at my uncle and my dad. And then whatever. Because... Because it goes on and on. And that's it (FGS3/252- 265-SSM2)

As the majority of the interviewed students stated the type of school they intend to attend, the results emerged from a total of thirty-one students showed that in the first focus group, three students chose a vocational institute, two chose a technical institute, and two are still undecided. In the second focus group, two students chose a high school, one chose a vocational institute, one chose a technical institute, and one student is still undecided. In the third focus group, three students chose a high school, while six chose a technical institute, although one student is still undecided. Ultimately, in the fourth focus group, four students chose a technical institute, three chose a high school, one chose a vocational institute, and two are still undecided.

Overall, in the four focus groups, eight out of thirty-one students chose a high school. Among these eight students, five were native students, two were second-generation students born in Italy, and one was a migrant student who arrived in Italy at the age of twelve. This aligns with existing

literature that underscores the under presence of students with immigrant background in lyceums in Italy (Santangati & Colussi, 2020).

Orientation Services

The second macro-category, which emerged 178 times in the students' narratives, encompasses three categories: *orientation services offered by the middle school, guidance services offered by the secondary school and guidance services offered by the city*. Each theme highlights different aspects of the support structures that influence students' academic track choices.

- ***Orientation Services Offered by the Lower Secondary School***

The first micro-category pertains to the orientation services provided by secondary schools, encompassing resources such as classroom orientation sessions and guidance counselling. In Italian schools, the role of a guidance counselor is typically carried out by a teacher assigned to assist students with school and career choices. Unlike in some other education systems such as US, UK and Germany (Fitzenberger et al., 2020; Slaten et al., 2024; Wingfield et al., 2010) where professional guidance counselors are specifically trained and dedicated to this role, Italian schools rely on teachers who take on these additional responsibilities alongside their regular teaching duties⁵.

The classroom sessions may involve various activities, including informative presentations by teachers or guidance counselor, as well as discussions where ideas, thoughts, and advice about educational choices are shared. The students highlighted the counselor-led activities:

There is a teacher who showed us a PowerPoint with schools and addresses to help us choose. (FGS2/233-SSM3)

[The teacher] explained to us all the different schools, what they did and what they offered. (FGS4/491-SSM5)

Prof. C., for orientation, she puts for us on Classroom everything, all the information. (FGS4/508/1-SSM2)

Students perceived that dedicated orientation hours with a specialized teacher were helpful (FGS4/514-SSM3). The students also highlighted that they viewed the schools through their websites, some of them explained that finding all the links of all schools in Verona were presented in a single website was helpful (FGS4/396/2-SSM3). Some second-generation students noted how by visiting the website the interest in a certain track develops (FGS4/413/2-SSM4).

⁵ In Italian, the term *docente referente dell'orientamento* refers to a teacher responsible for assisting students with their educational and career choices.

Some students found the orientation activities in the classroom useful as they noted how this program helped them with a clearer understanding, while some other students experienced confusion.

Maybe we have doubts about schools or ideas. Ehm then the orientation [program] actually clears up, I mean ... (FGS4/574-SSM5)

In contrast another student expressed frustration with the orientation process, stating that it only caused confusion and left them feeling uncertain about their choices

I would say none, because the orientation only put me in chaos let's say; so none (FGS4/518-SSM9)

Students emphasized the role of guidance counselors in helping them gain a clearer understanding of academic tracks, with one student noting that a private conversation with the counselor, followed by an additional session, played a key role in clarifying the benefits of choosing a technical institution and boosting their confidence in the decision (FGS3/331/3-SSM8). They also explained the opportunity for meetings with both parents and teachers, help them receive more tailored and personalized advice for their track choice,

For us students, I don't think so, but how can we have a meeting; for parents to talk with the teachers to find out which direction is more... that is to say for the pupil which subject he could do with his passions and also with the teachers in his class which subjects he's good at and which he's not...(FGS2/283-SSM2)

The advice of the Guidance Council, on the other hand, refers to a recommendation for a secondary school made by the entire Class Council. This council includes all the teachers who have worked closely with the students throughout their academic journey. The recommendation is typically shared with the students and their family before the start of the secondary school enrollment period (MIM, 2022). We attempted to determine whether the guidance provided by the teachers aligned with the students' preferred track choice. Some students found the guidance provided by teachers helpful in clarifying their track choice, noting that the recommendations reinforced their decision and confirmed that they were on the right path. Some students specifically mentioned how the guidance confirmed the appropriateness of their choice. (FGS1/453-SSM4; FGS3/354-SSM6).

Some students indicated that the guidance encouraged them to explore a wider range of options, broadening their perspective beyond their initial focus. Some students explained how, after the teacher's suggestions, they reconsidered their initial choice and visited various schools and open days to explore other possibilities (FGS3/350-SSM8). In contrast to how the students, mostly native, found the advice of Guidance council helpful, some students expressed that this advice generates confusion. These students were majorly second-generation students born in Italy.

The advice left me feeling uncertain because I had three schools I really liked. However, I was considering the Technical Institute for Finance and Marketing, which my cousin had attended. He graduated twice with honors, a perfect 110/110, and spoke highly of the school. But I also looked into... I considered the Technical Institute for Dentistry, and Chemical Economics because they interested me more. At first, I hadn't made a decision, as my parents had initially guided me towards the Finance and Marketing path. But then I visited the schools, and so... it was a bit... (FGS3/361-SSM8)

The recommended track of the advice council in some cases reflects the student's track choice:

My choice would be to attend a technical institute for administration, finance, and marketing. The teachers also confirmed my choice. Um, I've decided to pursue this because, first, I'm interested in the subjects covered, but also because it's somewhat related to the job I'd like to have when I grow up, and because it would give me some practical experience. After finishing the five years, I could go to university to pursue the career of my dreams.(FGS3/291-SSM8)

Overall, in this data, most of the students who reported confirmation of their academic track were native, with only a few being second-generation immigrants. The narratives shared by our participants highlighted instances of discrepancies between their preferred track and the track recommended by the professors' advice council. The accordance of advice with the student's preference depends majorly on their academic outcomes and performance (Checchi & Flabbi, 2006).

The experience shared by a second-generation students illustrated how the advised track did not align with their university-oriented interests (e.g., FGS3/252-SSM2),

Well, I would also like to attend a technical economic institute, but the guidance council told me, I mean, a vocational commercial services institute. I'm trying to improve in the subjects I need to improve. (FGS3/267/1-SSM5)

The guidance council (...) they put for me Socio-Healthcare Operator⁶(Vocational institution), but in fact I want to pull myself up in subjects, because I have two choices I went to F. high school and there I saw two addresses that interest me a lot, the chemical institute or the dental technician interest me a lot, the chemical institute or the dental technician because one pushes me there's the dental technician especially a laboratory that I saw and then I also have a friend who goes there and she addressed me. I mean, she told me all the things that are done like all the braces, all the teeth, all um all the anatomy. (FGS3/287/2-SSM7)

Notably, the mismatch between the students' expectations and the advice received according to some students led to feelings of disappointment or had a negative effect on their performance.

Because they recommended a professional and I was very disappointed. Because I didn't expect it. Because I thought you had to be a technician, the subjects math core subjects and that's it and so I put more effort into the math, in fact, in the last two tests I got an eight; geometry and arithmetic; but I put more effort into math than into the other subjects. So, I got them very low and so I was a bit disappointed. (FGS4/600-SSM2)

I was very disappointed like M., because they placed me in a vocational odontotechnical course, which is not for me. So, I was disappointed both by the results I had given some time ago, and now I'm doing poorly in school, in fact. (FGS4/613-SSM9)

Some students, when their preferred track did not align with the teachers' recommendations, chose to follow their own path instead of the advice given. For instance, a native student shared their decision to disregard the teacher's guidance, stating that despite being told the track wasn't suitable for them, they decided to pursue what they felt was right (FGS4/447/3-SSM9).

According to Ciccarelli (2019) while not mandatory, it is important to note that in some institutions, this 'advice' serves as an admission criterion, particularly when the number of applicants exceeds the available spots.

- ***Guidance Services Offered by the Secondary School***

School guidance is often seen as a process of providing information—through events like open days, orientation fairs, and brochures, to help students make informed choices about their academic paths (Ciccarelli, 2019). The second category, guidance services offered by the secondary school, highlights the guidance resources provided by schools, particularly focusing on open-day events and mini-jobs.

⁶*Operatore Socio Sanitario (O.S.S.)*, a professional figure that originates from the synthesis of roles in both the social and healthcare sectors, responding to the evolving needs of personal services, as defined by the Veneto Region's guidelines [Regione Veneto, 2024](#)..

The open-day allows students and their families to explore educational offerings, visit the school, and meet teachers or students. Some participants explained how they explored the high schools during the open days and how these events helped with their orientation (FGS1/196/1-SSM4).

That's right, go to the open day, look at the timetable online, see the statistics on graduates, how many go to university, how many do not. How many graduate, how many don't. (...) etcetera and also look at the presentations online with the headmaster, I watched the M. high school presentations, and I also watched with my dad and my dad summed me up and it was quite promising as what they said in the presentation. So, they are both good schools but I'm still not sure which one. (FGS1/194-SSM4)

the open day helped a lot and... also the timetable and the video lesson, that is the video presentation with the manager where they explained how it works, that is to say, at the two-year and three-year levels it was very clear, so... (FGS1/211-SSM2)

As noted in the students' comments, many found it both interesting and helpful to visit secondary schools in order to gather information and make a more informed decision. Another tool that students both native and with migrant background identified as particularly useful is the mini-job, which involves days organized by secondary schools where students can take part in lessons or workshop activities, offering them a direct experience of the school environment (e.g., FGS1/223-SSM1; FGS1/241-SSM3).

Overall, from most students' point of view emerged that the most valuable instrument for evaluation and track orientation is the open-day, however the possibility of mini-job eases the decision,

I went to the open day of two schools, A. High school and S. high school, but I they confused me and I'm undecided between two schools. And I also went to the mini-job at S. yesterday, and it was a very nice experience (FGS2/316-SSM1)

Basically, the choice of dental technician, (...), was recommended to me by a friend of mine who's in fifth year. I basically went to the open-day as well and she showed me all the different tools she uses, like the electric spatula and the drawings. Then I also got to know some of the teachers and from there I saw that the school focuses on three subjects: dental technology, chemistry and biochemistry. So, when I went to see the dental technician, they also told us about the other addresses. In fact, I went to see the school twice. (FGS3/335/1-SSM7)

These narratives highlight how presentations during open days, combined with practical experiences like mini-jobs, provide students with valuable, concrete insights.

- ***Guidance Services Offered by the city***

In addition to school-organized activities such as open days and in-class orientation sessions, students also took part in broader initiatives like the city-run Orientation Fair. This event, specifically designed for third-year lower secondary school students, brings together state and private institutions, including high schools, technical institutes, vocational schools, and training centers. By showcasing their educational programs and offerings in one centralized location, the fair aims to provide students with comprehensive information to support their decision-making process.

Many students noted that the orientation fair helped decide which schools to visit for open days, valuing senior students' testimonies and conversations with professors for clarifying study plans. A student explained,

In the end, I liked it a lot, also because of the subjects, also because of the way the school is structured, so I chose it and then I also went to the Gran Guardia and talked, I mean together with him (the classmate) I went, I talked with a student who attends the fifth year of the course that I also like, that is, business information systems.(FGS3/319/2-SSM4)

We went to the orientation fair at Palazzo della Gran Guardia to see all the schools in Verona. A teacher also came and gave us advice about orientation, showing us all the study tracks and the ones we were interested in(...). (FGS2/237-SSM2)

At the same time, some students found the large number of choices overwhelming, leading to confusion rather than clarity—especially for those still undecided. A student explained:

for me too, like the Gran Guardia, it's not that it's going to be very useful, but as A. said, it's a bit confusing explaining all the schools to us; I feel that the open-day is much more useful. That I also found this school very welcoming, very beautiful too, and also from the way the students spoke they explained the various addresses well, and it convinced me even more what the open-day is all about because they explained all the various things well. (FGS4/504/3-SSM1(Boh, I don't know, well it seems that you like some schools, it's easy to find information, but if you haven't chosen anything at all, it's very confusing. (FGS2/251-SSM5)

Students shared their evaluations of their experiences, often comparing the Orientation Fair with other activities such as open days and in-class guidance sessions. Many emphasized that the combination of these initiatives—open days, the Orientation Fair, and class-based sessions—

provided comprehensive support for their orientation decisions. A 1.5 generation student elaborated on how these various activities and services, organized by middle school, secondary school, and the city, guided his decision-making process.

So, in my opinion it was to take us to see the open-day of the various schools (orientation fair), as well as orientation professor, who came to all the classes for, if I'm not mistaken, three hours talking about the various schools and telling us what they do, the timetables. It did help; in my opinion it helped a lot because she told us all the things you did at school timetables that you could hardly see. (FGS1/433-SSM3)

Lower Secondary School: Considerations of Young Students

The next emergent macro-category, presented in 151 voices, focused on the following main categories: *school organization, human relations, and students' reflections on their schooling, passions and interests*. The thematic highlights topics such as the strengths and weaknesses of the lower secondary school, along with suggestions for improvement. These themes encompass activities, facilities, relationships, and self-assessment of one's academic journey within the lower secondary school. Students also shared their thoughts on factors influencing their academic performance and potential challenges and their daily or recreational activities.

- ***School Organization***

The students noted frequently how they gained valuable insights and experiences through the National Operational Programme (NOP)⁷. This initiative, titled 'For Schools - Competences and Environments for Learning' by the Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research, aimed to establish a high-quality education system, funded by European Structural Funds from 2014 to 2020 (Regolamento (UE) N. 1301/2013, 2013). NOP modules typically last 30 or 60 hours, with foreign language courses extending to 100 hours. Modules serve as the basic design unit, defined by specific subject areas, duration, and required roles like an Expert and Tutor, with optional additional roles (Miur, 2017). The program supports the EU 2020 strategy by improving education quality, reducing school dropout rates, and enhancing skills development for youth and adults. It strengthens the link between education and the labor market, particularly in technical and vocational sectors, to boost employment. It also promotes environmental sustainability through energy-efficient school infrastructure and raises climate change awareness, fostering social

⁷ Il Programma Operativo Nazionale (PON) del Miur in Italian also referred to as Corsi PON in Italian.

cohesion and inclusion. (Programma Operativo Nazionale Per la Scuola, 2021). For lower secondary schools, the project must include at least two of the following training modules for basic skills: mother tongue, Italian for Foreigners (L2), Foreign language, English language for primary school pupils (Miur 2017). Starting from the 2021/2022 academic year, some schools also offer additional modules, such as music and creativity.

The participants both native and students with immigrant background shared their positive perceptions about the NOP courses. They highlighted these afternoons courses as a possibility of new experiences of development of abilities and to explore various jobs. The students expressed that they find these courses both interesting and useful (FGS1/70-SSM1). Student reflected on how these courses helped clarify topics they had only briefly encountered in class or allowed them to explore topics in greater depth:

Exactly [NOP courses serve] to go into more detail on certain topics that you may have heard about but did not know what they were... (FGS1/90-SSM4)

Also, the PON courses. I didn't take any last year, but this year I did. They're very interesting, something different to fill my afternoons since I don't have much to do apart from homework and a few hobbies during the week. So, yes, it was interesting and also useful to deepen topics you study in class or that you'll cover the following year. (FGS1/88-SSM4)

Another theme that emerged from the students' discussions was the teachers' teaching methods and relational approaches in lower secondary school on their learning experience. The students shared how the kind demeanor of their teachers and their balanced instructional methods facilitated learning, even with the increased number of subjects (FGS1/84-SSM4 & FGS1/103-SSM5). Some students shared views on managing homework and school tasks, with a few seeing it as a strength of middle school (FGS1/68-SSM1). However, few students mentioned tests, quizzes, and heavy books as challenges in middle school (FGS4/161-SSM2).

Some students expressed preferences for more hands-on, outdoor, or technology-based learning experiences, highlighting their interest in practical and dynamic instructional approaches (FGS4/213-SSM2; FGS4/216-SSM6). Some students highlighted their preference for practical and laboratory-based lessons (FGS4/123-SMM5), reflecting an interest in experiential, hands-on learning. (FGS4/123-SMM5). Additionally, others emphasized the potential benefits of incorporating more interactive, experiential learning opportunities, which they believed would

make lessons more engaging and memorable. These suggestions reflect a desire for more dynamic learning environments that combine technology, outdoor activities, and traditional classroom experiences.

- ***Relations at School***

Research indicated that teacher support, or perceived support, as well as effective teaching practices that aid student development, were discussed in the previous chapter (e.g. Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Goodwin & Stanton, 2022). These positive interactions with teachers are crucial and foster a sense of school belonging and enhance motivation for schoolwork, thereby protecting against low academic performance (Goodenow, 1993). As mentioned earlier, students shared their perspectives on their relationships with teachers, which also encompassed teaching practices and teachers' competencies. In this data, students highlighted their relationships with teachers as a key strength of their middle school experience (*FGS4/127-SMM1*). A student with an immigrant background emphasized the significance of supportive teachers and well-structured instruction, noting how these factors contributed to a more positive and manageable school experience. The student appreciated the simplicity of the school environment, the kindness of the teachers, and the clear organization of homework, all of which made learning feel easier (*FGS1/113-SSM6*).

Alongside these valuable teacher-student relationships, interactions with friends and classmates also play a vital role in shaping students' school experiences (Hughes et al., 2008). Many students in the focus groups highlighted how friendships and peer connections encouraged them to continue their school journey. These narratives were common among both native students and students with immigrant backgrounds (*FGS2/60/1-SSM2*; *FGS3/84/2-SSM5*; *FGS3/97/1-SSM8*).

Building on human relations in school, while not all students reported interactions with school psychologists, for those who did, these interactions were particularly meaningful. A student highlighted the value of interactions with the school psychologist, emphasizing the importance of having a trusted space for emotional support. They expressed feeling comfortable sharing personal experiences and noted regularly seeking this resource, which provided a consistent and reassuring presence throughout their school journey (*FGS4/133-SSM9*). This example underscores how a supportive psychological environment can foster a sense of school belonging and enhance academic motivation (Roeser et al., 1996). (Roeser et al., 1996).

- ***Students' Reflections on their Schooling***

The students reflected on their favorite subjects, the subjects in which they perceived themselves as stronger, and their NOP courses. Physical education, music, and languages were frequently mentioned as areas of interest and strength.

The students also shared their self-evaluations of their academic performance. These perceptions of academic success or challenges are particularly important, as they significantly influence students' decisions regarding track selection and their future academic paths. Notably, only a few native students reported strong performance in Italian, while no immigrant students highlighted this subject. In contrast, a few immigrant students expressed confidence in their abilities in mathematics and science, subjects that were more commonly identified as strengths by Italian students. These reflections reveal the students' self-perceptions of their academic strengths and suggest that subject-specific performance may influence their engagement and track selection.

Additionally, some students expressed a desire to improve their results in certain subjects during this final year of middle school. For example, a native student explained:

I said, I do well in science, and I like the whole human body and physical education that sport is. Anyway, school performance is good, I mean an average of seven- eight. Um, except for some subjects for example History, I mean I go six seven, I don't do very well. And also, German. But why... I mean, I think I got an eight on my report card last year in German, but this year I have to improve my grade. (FGS3/159-SSM1)

Some native and second-generation immigrant participants noted the improvements they had already achieved in their performance (FGS4/274-SSM1; FGS4/248-SSM3 & FGS4/250-SSM2). Students also noted declines in their academic performance, with some attributing the increasing difficulty of school subjects as the primary reason (FGS4/255-SSM7; FGS4/259-SSM9). This sentiment was expressed by both native and immigrant-background students. For example, some native students shared:

Like, last year in Italian, I could get nines and so on; whereas this year, I'm at six, five. (FGS4/253-SSM7)

Some students associated their academic declines with personal issues and challenges outside of school.

Last year it was OK I also had seven, but this year with I think... I mean this year I think I'm having problems too, outside school. (FGS4/265-SSM8)

Participants underscored the influence of factors such as family composition, the presence of younger siblings, and parental relationships. The participants' experiences offer insights into the challenges and supports shaping their academic journeys. As highlighted in the literature discussed in the previous chapter, the family environment plays a crucial role in academic experiences. (e.g., Hou & Zhang, 2015; Figlio et al., 2017; Entorf & Lauk, 2008; Paat, 2015). Some students provided specific examples of these dynamics. For instance, two second-generation students explained:

The first and second year of middle school was definitely a big change not only at school but also at home. With the sisters they used to disturb me, now they bother me less. To say that now they've added another day they finish at four, so I have more time.. (FGS4/280-SSM2)

I also agree with M. Because sometimes my dad, since my parents are separated and my younger sister is there, disturbs me; that's it...a bit...um...(FGS4/290-SSM6)

Some students highlighted the effect of psychological factors such as temperament depending to the daily mood or related to the level of difficulty of the subjects of each day (FGS4/304-SSM6; FGS4/306-SSM7). Research highlighted the effect of psychological well-being and cognitive abilities on academic achievement (e.g., Vanlaar et al., 2014; Verhaeghe et al., 2018). Some students indicated the concentration difficulty.

And also, because maybe like A. I can't concentrate and I can't stay focused. (FGS4/325-SSM9)

Yes, me too; there are days when I'm more tired because of the subjects, and I can't focus well. But it's nice to come, also for the friends, to spend some time together. (FGS4/335-SSM8)

Research has shown that perceived teacher bias and social isolation can hinder student engagement, highlighting the importance of teacher support (Baysu & Phalet, 2012). The students' narratives further underscored the significance of relationships with teachers and classmates. One second-generation immigrant student reflected on difficulties encountered in primary school, describing feelings of fear, social rejection, and isolation (FGS3/99-SSM8). A second-generation student described how past experiences with bullying during primary school created initial anxiety and hesitance in engaging with her new school environment. The fear of facing similar situations in middle school made the transition particularly challenging (FGS3/128-SSM7).

Discrimination can reveal biases that marginalize students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Building on these challenges, another student shared an experience of facing discrimination within the school setting. Such experiences underscore the additional layers of difficulty encountered by students from immigrant backgrounds, beyond interpersonal conflicts.

In primary school they used to tease me maybe because of my skin colour or they used to tell me I was slim but in my opinion that wasn't true and then that was it. (FGS3/117-SSM2)

- ***Passions and Interests***

The students also highlighted their interests in sports, the arts, social activities, daily routines, and recreational pursuits. Among these, their primary passions were for sports and recreational activities, particularly football, basketball, and various types of dances. (FGS3/4-SSM1; FGS3/48-SSM9; FGS2/18-SSM5). Some students expressed interest in more intellectual pursuits, such as languages, history, and science (FGS4/47-SSM4; FGS3/24-SSM4; FGS4/38-SSM3). These interests often reflected a combination of intellectual curiosity and personal hobbies. Notably, many students both native and with immigrant background indicated their interest in videogames and use of digital devices as recreation.

I have my passion. It's video games. But I also like playing cards, I also discovered a sport here at school Badminton that I like very much. (FGS3/32-SSM5)

I like many things, for example playing video games, following football. I was also born here in Verona (...). (FGS3/22-SSM3)

I am 14 years old and I like to spend time on video games. (FGS2/10-SSM3)

I like going out with friends, using the cellphone, sleeping, even eating, even cooking sometimes.

I don't like school very much, but yes, it's ok (FGS4/77-SSM7)

Importantly, some students specified that their extracurricular activities, particularly sports, were compromised to prioritize academic performance. One 1.5-generation student shared how the demands of studying led to giving up basketball, a sport they had enjoyed and practiced for many years (FGS1/18-SSM2).

Students' passions, from sports and dance to intellectual pursuits like history and languages, highlight their dynamic engagement both recreationally and academically. While these interests

often overlap with school experiences, some students noted challenges, such as balancing passions with academic responsibilities, as seen in the student who quit basketball due to study overload. According to Durlak et al. (2010), after-school programs foster personal and social skills, offering multiple benefits to youth and potentially impacting students' academic outcomes. This aligns with students' earlier views on school-offered activities, showing how programs like sports and arts can either support or restrict passions depending on their availability and how well they meet students' interests and needs. This interplay shows how schools can better align extracurricular activities with students' interests.

Languages Between Home and School

As noted earlier, language skills influence both academic aspirations and achievement, but the relationship is also shaped by the language environment students are exposed to. Research has shown that immigrant students who are more immersed in the language of instruction tend to experience better academic outcomes (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2020). This section explores various factors related to language, including proficiency in the language of instruction, home language use, and the progression of language acquisition in the context of schooling.

This macro-category emerged from 43 responses from the students in focus groups and included three categories: *language skills*, *language skills learned at home*, *language skills learned at school*.

- ***Language Skills***

We asked the students about their language competencies. As expected, the native students reported speaking Italian or an Italian dialect, as well as English as a foreign language they had learned, or another language they were currently learning (FGS3/225-SSM5; FGS3/210-SSM1). It appears that students with immigrant background, particularly from the second generation tend to develop stronger multilingual skills, effectively maintaining their heritage language while becoming fluent in Italian and other foreign languages, demonstrating their ability to navigate and integrate multiple linguistic contexts.

I can speak Arabic and, well, Italian, English and French er, that's it. (FGS3/212-SSM2)

So as foreign languages I know Italian, Romanian, English and German, let's say. And practically at home I rarely speak Italian, I speak more Romanian than anything else. (FGS3/219-SSM4)

Students with mixed-parent backgrounds often reported proficiency in Italian and other foreign languages, but their connection to their heritage language varied.

That is, foreign languages I speak English, I don't... I lived for many years in Croatia, but I don't... that is, only two little words. (FGS3/208-SSM1)

I know Italian, English and French. And I understand Moldavian because my mother is of Moldavian origin, but I can't speak it, well enough... very well. (FGS3/215-SSM3)

While some showed interest in their parent's native language, their proficiency was often limited, reflecting both opportunities and challenges in maintaining linguistic ties to their diverse cultural backgrounds.

- ***Language Skills Learned at Home***

The students' responses coincide with what has been emphasized above. From these narratives emerges that the students with immigrant background usually speak both Italian and the native language, this information was shared by students both from 1.5 and 2.0 generations.

So, the Moroccan, because... I mean my grandmother came, my grandfather, then I came down a year or two as a child to Morocco because my mum sent me there. (FGS1/127-SSM7)

I speak Spanish at home, but sometimes I say a few words in Italian, because it comes better. Since I left my country when I was five. So, I am Spanish, but some things don't come to me, so I say them in Italian. (FGS1/146/1-SSM3)

Some students with immigrant background highlighted that they use native language with parents due to their lack of language knowledge or because they insist on using their heritage language.

At home I speak English with my parents and Italian with my brother because they do not understand and I can speak, English, French and Italian (FGS1/152-SSM6)

At home I speak Urdu and also a little Italian because my brother knows Italian. (FGS1/150/1-SSM5)

I speak Italian; at home, Moldovan. Only sometimes I find it difficult because I use Italian all day, so it comes to me automatically. Although my parents insist on speaking Moldovan at home. And I am learning Russian and English and French. (FGS3/238-SSM8)

In summary, the narratives reveal that students with immigrant backgrounds often balance the use of their native language and Italian, with parents playing a key role in maintaining heritage language use at home. According to Ciccarelli (2019) students with parents who lack proficiency in the host country's language may experience limited language development, affecting their academic performance. This highlights the importance of addressing linguistic support both at home and in school

- ***Language Skills Learned at School***

All of our participants highlighted that the school offers courses in other foreign languages, such as English, German, and French. Students both native and immigrant shared which languages they were learning at school.

at school yes English and maybe German but very little, because I did not study much (FGS1/146/2-SSM3)

And [I study] English and French at school, but French very little (FGS1/150/2-SSM5)

Yes [I speak] English and German at school, then if I need them, I need them so [...]. (FGS1/142-SSM1)

In conclusion, students, both native and immigrant, highlighted the variety of foreign languages offered at school, with English, German, and French being common choices. While some students reported limited exposure to certain languages, it is clear that the school environment provides opportunities to learn multiple languages, contributing to their linguistic development.

4.5.1.1 Summary of Insights from Students' Voices

The students' narratives revealed the challenging nature of making orientation decisions. One of the primary reasons for these difficulties was their limited perspective on future possibilities. Additionally, the data highlighted tensions arising from balancing the desire for financial stability with personal aspirations and dreams. Uncertainty often emerged, particularly when students perceived misalignment between their preferences and teachers' recommendations regarding educational tracks.

Both parents and teachers were identified as vital sources of support through their involvement, feedback, and recognition. Guidance counselors also played a significant role in the orientation process, though students expressed contrasting views about their effectiveness. While some found the advice helpful, others felt it led to confusion. Formal guidance was seen as beneficial in cases

of indecision yet sometimes conflicted with students' preferences. Notably, students perceived a degree of bias in the recommendations given by class teachers, as these judgments were often influenced by the teachers' subject expertise.

The orientation decision was further complicated by the complexity of educational tracks and pathways. Immigrant parents, in particular, often lacked sufficient knowledge about the education system. Nevertheless, parents were directly and indirectly involved in gathering information to assist their children. Students valued insights gained from the first-hand experiences of siblings, peers, and family members, as well as through their parents' social networks. However, for immigrant families, these networks tended to focus on job prospects and anticipated opportunities within their community, which often steered students toward vocational tracks.

Parent-child discussions and reflections emerged as key factors that built confidence and encouraged thoughtful decision-making. Conversely, parental doubts and high expectations contributed to uncertainty. Peers also played a significant role in the orientation process, particularly for recently immigrated students or those lacking other social support. In some cases, peers recommended specific tracks. Beyond orientation, peer relationships were crucial for immigrant students, as they helped mitigate risks of social isolation, bullying, and discrimination, while fostering a sense of belonging.

Among the services available for orientation, students identified open days as the most valuable. Opportunities for mini-jobs where present were also considered highly beneficial.

The findings further indicated that immigrant students with parents who possessed knowledge of the language of instruction encountered fewer struggles with language skills. In some cases, parents insisted on maintaining the heritage language, but students generally did not report difficulties with the instructional language.

4.5.2 Perspectives from Teachers and the Guidance Counselor

While students shared their personal experiences and perceptions regarding school experience and educational guidance, the perspectives of teachers and orientation counselor offer insights into the institutional and pedagogical strategies and social dynamics that shape these experiences. In this section, the focus shifts to the narratives provided by head teachers, whose roles encompass teaching, advising, and supporting students in their academic journey and their transition to higher secondary school. Additionally, the present section incorporates insights from the guidance

counselor, whose specialized perspective adds depth to the understanding of orientation and transition processes.

By including these voices, the study aimed to offer a complementary perspective to student experiences but also ensuring a triangulated approach in analyzing the challenges and opportunities immigrant students encounter. Headteachers' and the counselor's perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding institutional practices, language support mechanisms, and the social and academic dynamics influencing academic choices.

The data analysis involved two groups of head teachers and the guidance counselor, using two different techniques: focus groups and interviews. The interviews involved the guidance counselor and three head teachers, while five headteachers participated in the focus group. Each group was guided by a distinct set of questions, one for head teachers and another for guidance counselor. This process with these three sources of data led to the emergence of three different codebooks each consisting of two macro categories. In the following pages, the analysis of the three codebooks is presented concisely, with a brief internal comparison of the data between the perspectives of coordinators and guidance counselors.

Two macro categories emerged from the data shared by the head teachers and the guidance counselor during the focus group and interviews: *the class system and educational guidance*.⁸ These two macro-categories covered various aspects related to orientation activities, services, instruments, and procedures. They also addressed key roles, risk factors, and protective factors that influence track decisions during the transition to upper secondary school. The data will be compared and discussed in relation to the research question. Key themes will be highlighted, and connections will be drawn between the perspectives of the different sources.

4.5.3 Class System

4.5.3.1 Class System Giving Voice to the Head Teachers and the guidance counselor

⁸ The two macro-categories are the class system and educational guidance, with partially distinct subcategories. In this work, to streamline the information and avoid overburdening the reader, only the categories deemed relevant to the research question are presented under the macro-category of the class system. For a comprehensive overview of the analysis findings, please refer to the codebook included in the appendix. The results are available upon reasonable request.

This section focuses on the categories and themes within the broader macro category of the *Class System* that are directly relevant to the research question.

The subcategories presented in this section address data related to the following themes:

-Teachers' experience with the theme of continuous or interrupted interaction with the class group throughout middle school,

-Class characteristics covering different types of heterogeneity in class context

-Parental involvement in students' school life with themes of School-family relations, including support for families facing language barriers in communication with schools.

-Teacher-parent interaction

These themes collectively provide critical insights into the structural and relational dynamics within the classroom environment, offering a contextual lens through which to understand the experiences shared by the participants. They shed light on the challenges and opportunities that influence the academic trajectories of immigrant students. This section examines how class systems intersect with the research question, providing a deeper understanding of the elements shaping educational outcomes, including track decisions.

Teacher's Experience

In relation to the research question on the experience of orientation, the theme of continuity in teacher-class interaction during middle school emerged from the focus groups and interviews with teachers. This micro-category from guidance counselor's perspectives encompasses the themes of Engagement in orientation and support for students with a migrant background and Interaction with third-year classes.

- ***Continuity of Teacher-Class Interaction in Middle School***

The head teachers in the focus group highlighted their varying levels of involvement in following students throughout their lower secondary education. While some teachers have maintained consistent contact with their students since the beginning of their schooling, others have had intermittent interactions. In summary, most head teachers reported maintaining a continuous relationship with their classrooms throughout the three years of middle school.

The guidance counselor described her dual role, highlighting her long-standing experience in providing orientation support, a responsibility she has held for approximately seven years (EGDNR-T12). In addition to teaching math and science, she allocates dedicated time—specifically two hours—for orientation and science-related activities, balancing her instructional duties with her commitment to guiding students in their educational choices (EGDNR-T20).

Regarding the continuity of interaction with the third-year classes, the counselor emphasized that she closely follows the class she heads while also supporting the other third-year classes. One of these classes is her own, which she has taught since the first year of middle school, allowing her to provide more focused guidance for that group while also offering support to the others (EGDR-T12).

One of them is actually my class, which I've had since the first year of middle school. I follow one class more closely for orientation and support the other one as well (EGDR -T20).

The guidance counselor emphasized her activity for foundational literacy support for migrant students (EGDNR -T14). She shared her experiences regarding her role and the challenges of supporting students within the class system focusing on the challenges of supporting students, particularly those with newly arrived migrant background. She mentioned that her role included also managing alternative learning programs (EGDNR- T14).

Class Characteristics

The categories presented in this section address *educationally heterogeneity within the classroom, diversity of backgrounds in classrooms, newly arrived immigrant students, socio-cultural diversity within the classroom, difficulties related to sociocultural heterogeneity*. In the following pages, this data is summarized and discussed.

- ***Educationally Heterogeneous Classes***

The head teachers in the focus group and interviews highlighted the multifaceted challenges and opportunities posed by educationally heterogeneous classrooms. These environments are characterized by diversity in linguistic abilities, academic levels, and socio-cultural backgrounds, requiring teachers to adopt flexible and tailored approaches. Teachers highlighted the importance of adapting their teaching to meet each student's needs. They explained that this approach goes beyond solving problems, aiming to ensure all students have equal opportunities to progress:

I feel that I have to work on each student, providing different answers, not only to address problematic issues but also to support equal levels of progress, which are influenced by various challenges. (FGD- EGDNR6-T34)

However, some head teachers in the focus group emphasized that classroom diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for professional growth. One teacher explained that working with a heterogeneous group of students requires adaptability, as it necessitates tailoring instructional strategies, lesson content, and assessment methods to meet varied learning needs. This process, while stimulating and rewarding, also demands significant effort to ensure that teaching approaches are inclusive and responsive to all students (FGD-EGDNR6-T30).

Linguistic diversity added another layer of complexity, with students facing challenges due to language barriers or gaps in foundational knowledge (FGD- EGDNR5-T51). Teachers noted that they frequently adapted teaching materials and assessments to meet varied needs, often preparing multiple versions of the same test:

Because you always work on small groups and some pupils are at a linguistic disadvantage (...) as my colleagues said. Every time one prepares for a test, 3-4 different copies is the same. (FGD-EGDNR7-T55)

The teachers further indicated that some classes presented unique challenges due to the presence of students with behavioral difficulties or disabilities, which significantly impacted classroom dynamics. The teachers highlighted the heightened effort required to manage such a class (FGD-EGDNR7 -T57).

Also, interviews with teachers highlighted the spectrum of academic abilities in classrooms, ranging from students with significant challenges to high-achieving individuals. One teacher noted the complexity of addressing the varied characteristics and behaviors of students within a single class. She underscored the complexity teachers face in addressing the varied needs and behaviors of students in the same classroom (INT- EGDNR2-T23). Other interviewed teachers also noted educational heterogeneity within their classes (INT- EGDNR3-T14)

Notably a teacher pointed out the presence of high-performing immigrant students, demonstrating the potential for academic excellence within diverse classrooms:

In general, even at the educational level, let's say they are quite a high level. Among them there are also (...) some Italian foreigners. Among these good ones there are also a couple of foreign kids. (INT-EGDNR3-T16)

- ***Diversity of Student Backgrounds***

Teachers in the focus group and interviews consistently emphasized the rich diversity of student backgrounds in their school, reflecting a wide range of cultures, languages, and experiences (FGD-EGDNR4-T68; FGD-EGDNR7-T69). They noted how Italian had become an exception in their school context, highlighting the varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the *students* (FGD-EGDNR4-T75). *One teacher in the focus group shared a striking example of her classroom multilingual environment, highlighting the linguistic variety among her students. In her first-grade classroom of 18 students, nearly every student spoke a different language, with only one student being a native Italian speaker (FGD-EGDNR4-T73).*

Also, Interview data highlighted the multicultural composition of classrooms, with teachers describing classes as diverse, including students from regions such as Pakistan, Africa, Eastern Europe, Sri Lanka, and Brazil (INT-EGDNR1-T6). They also highlighted the diversity in behavior, interaction, and even appearance:

It's also interesting to observe the differences from all points of view, particularly in how students manage various situations and interact with others. Even in terms of clothing, there are many differences. It's a very diverse environment. (INT-EGD4-T6)

Another interviewed teacher described the diverse composition of their classroom, highlighting a blend of backgrounds among the students. Out of a total of approximately 20 to 22 students, only three were of fully Italian heritage. Several others had mixed heritage, with one Italian parent and one foreign parent, and were noted as being well-integrated and high-achieving. The majority of the class consisted of second-generation immigrant students, reflecting the multicultural dynamics present within the learning environment (INT-EGDNR3-T14). Despite the high percentage of immigrant students, teachers pointed out that most of their students were born in Italy to immigrant parents (INT-EGDNR2-T23 & 41). This cultural variety was described as both enriching and stimulating:

In the school, there is a high number of foreign students, although most of the children we have were born here in Italy. They are the children of people who came to Italy, and they were born here. In my opinion, most of them were born in Italy, at least the ones we have, and this also gives us the opportunity to interact with and experience different cultural realities. (...) Well, [school M] is quite a stimulating environment in every way, as you may have noticed from the socio-cultural reality, which is very diverse. (INT-EGDNR3-T6)

Also, the counselor highlighted the notable presence of students with a migrant background in their classes, shedding light on the diversity within classroom. She described the class composition, noting the significant number of students with an immigrant background who were born in Italy.

The class consists of 18 pupils, eleven of whom are of immigrant origin..., they were actually born in Italy and have foreign parents more than anything else, which shapes the overall composition of the class. (EGDR-T22)

- ***Newly Arrived Foreign Students***

Head teachers in the focus group highlighted the challenges of supporting newly arrived immigrant students, particularly those who join in the third grade of lower secondary school (FGD- EGDNR8-T23). They emphasized the need for prioritized language instruction to help these students integrate into the educational system effectively:

There is a student who needs to be taught basic literacy skills⁹. (FGD- EGDNR8-T23)

This year, a new student from Brazil joined the class. (INT-EGDNR1-T6)

The Moroccan student was placed in the second year of middle school in October, and now she's in the third year. She can already express herself very well. (INT-EGDNR1-T8)

The integration of newly arrived foreign students requires careful consideration of their linguistic and educational needs. The guidance counselor highlighted that placing newly arrived students in a lower class can create a supportive environment, giving them extra time to develop foundational language skills, adapt to the school setting, and build social connections. This approach is often considered beneficial in facilitating their overall adjustment to the educational system. The guidance counselor noted that direct placement in higher-level classes without sufficient literacy

⁹ In Italy referred as *corsi di alfabetizzazione*

support can be detrimental, as students may lack the foundational vocabulary and skills necessary for success:

[Insertion into the lower class] can have a positive effect as they stay here for an extra year and learn. In the meantime, they are in a more protected environment i.e. that of secondary school, they are better looked after; followed by literacy (...) not high school technical subjects (...); they get to know the kids and learn to speak.(EGDR-T88)
Otherwise [insertion of foreign newcomer pupils not in the lower class] really means throwing them into high school and they are not always literate enough if they don't have that vocabulary.(EGDR-T88)

According to the counselor, placement decisions are not solely based on age; an interview process assesses students' educational background and literacy levels to ensure appropriate integration. In cases of severe challenges, students may be placed in the second grade of middle school and later progress to the third year of lower secondary school, effectively repeating a year to ensure readiness for the next stage. For those with significant language needs, intensive literacy courses are prioritized. However, distinguishing between language barriers and broader learning difficulties remains challenging (EGDR-T86).

- ***Literacy Support for Newcomers***

This guidance counselor described efforts to provide literacy support to newcomers, both inside and outside the classroom. For instance, she explained the need to support students not only with the Italian language but also with the language of specific subjects like mathematics (EGDR-T14). Some students, particularly newcomers, receive language support during regular class activities (EGDR-T16). The interviewee noted that, while students are placed in their designated classes, they often require additional language support. As a result, many students are pulled out for extra help:

The pupils are placed in the classes but at the same time they need the language so they are taken out now too, only now they take care of cooperatives apposite to them. (EGDR-T16)

Teachers noted the successful integration of two recently arrived students who had completed literacy courses and were now able to communicate effectively in Italian (INT-EGDNR3-T14).

- ***Sociocultural Background Diversity and Associated Challenges***

Head teachers in the focus groups consistently highlighted the significant diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds within their classrooms, noting that this diversity profoundly impacts the

learning environment and teaching strategies. One teacher emphasized that classrooms are inherently heterogeneous, especially in terms of socio-cultural background and academic levels (FGD- EGDNR6-T30). Some teachers highlighted the necessity of recognizing and addressing the socio-cultural diversity within the classroom, emphasizing efforts to create inclusive learning experiences tailored to meet the varied needs of all students (FGD- EGDNR5-T51).

Head teachers acknowledged the enriching aspects of this diversity, and they discussed the challenges it brings. One teacher identified socio-cultural differences as a primary source of difficulty in the classroom. Some teachers succinctly identified socio-cultural differences as a primary source of difficulty in the classroom (FGD-EGDNR7-T63).

The most difficult aspect is the fact that within a class there are those who think one way and have a sociocultural level a little... (FGD-EGDNR4-T66)

Beyond recognizing the challenges, teachers also acknowledged the opportunities that such diversity presents. An interviewed head teacher expressed deep appreciation for the cultural diversity immigrant students bring to the classroom, emphasizing the unique perspectives they offer and the immense potential they possess. She described this diversity as a source of daily enrichment and a valuable aspect of the educational environment (INT-EGDNR1-T79).

Parental Involvement in Students' School Life

The micro-categories summarized under this category addressed themes related to the *lack of parents' involvement in school activities, teacher's perception of immigrant parent's involvement, reasons for the lack of parental support in guidance, Present Parents with Language Difficulties, Cultural and Social Influences on Parental Involvement.*

- ***Lack of Parents' Involvement in School Activities***

The guidance counselor noted disparities in the involvement of parents in the students' academic lives. According to her while some parents actively supported their children's education, others were perceived as entirely disengaged. However, this interviewee highlighted the negative experiences with the lack of parental engagement among some families of both Italian and

immigrant backgrounds. She noted that a significant number of parents appeared disengaged, rarely attending school meetings or responding to school communications.

There are Italian and foreign parents who do not come to the interviews. You never meet them, and they are completely absent, you can put all the notices you want but they don't read them. But if you send a note for their son's confiscated phone, they come immediately. So, it means that they read things but basically, they are not present. (EGDR-T58)

Similarly, the teachers participating in the focus group highlighted a significant lack of parental engagement and collaboration. They noted that many parents neither request meetings nor attend those organized by the school (FGD- EGDNR5-T81 & FGD- EGDNR6-T83). This lack of involvement was seen as a recurring challenge, as reflected in their comments:

Another problematic issue is also the lack of cooperation with the families. (FGD- EGDNR6-T76)

Also 80% [do not come to the interviews organized by the teachers]. (FGD- EGDNR4-T88)

The head teachers linked this limited presence of parents during middle school with an apparent lack of willingness to engage (FGD- EGDNR6-T138).

Some teachers also mentioned the disconnect between immigrant families and the school's support systems. One teacher remarked that many parents who avoid school meetings are also less likely to participate in orientation sessions, such as the Rete Tante Tinte, which are specifically orientation meetings designed for immigrant families (FG-EGDNR4-T235). Teachers expressed concern about the challenges faced by students without family's support (FG_D_EGDNR4-T470). Similarly, the guidance counselor noted that some immigrant parents are "completely absent" especially during orientation process:

Some (parents) are completely absent they don't care and so you have never seen them in three years, never.(EGDR-T56)

The counselor attributed this lack of engagement to various challenges, including socio-economic struggles, language barriers, and family responsibilities (EGDR-T58). Notably, the counselor expressed frustration, interpreting the absence of some parents as a lack of care. Reflecting a negative perception of parental absence, potentially overlooking structural barriers such as work

obligations, language challenges, or socio-economic difficulties that might prevent parents from engaging with the school. This comment suggests the need for a more empathetic approach to understanding and addressing parental involvement.

- ***Teacher's Perception of Immigrant Parent's Involvement***

Interviews with teachers revealed various perspectives on parental involvement and attitudes toward education among immigrant families. One teacher highlighted the critical role of parental involvement in student success, emphasizing that it goes beyond cultural interest. She pointed out the importance of parents actively instilling the value of education in their children and conveying its significance to foster academic engagement and motivation (INT-EGDNR3-T50). This teacher commented on how both foreign and Italian parents can be equally invested in their children's futures, while others may be indifferent:

A parent who cares about their child's future can be either foreign or Italian. Those who are disinterested can also be either Italian or foreign, in my opinion. (INT-EGDNR3-T52)

However, some teachers noted a lack of engagement from immigrant families, particularly when it comes to meetings and communication with the school. One teacher mentioned that, despite offering opportunities for meetings, foreign parents rarely attend:

Very often, when a student is not studying well and brings home poor grades, the situation is the same. Today, for example, during our general parent-teacher meetings, I had very few foreign families attending. The foreign student's family is not present in the school life at all. (INT-EGDNR2-T66)

- ***Reasons for the Lack of Parental Support***

To explain the lack of family cooperation and participation in students' school life, some head teachers pointed to a lack of willingness and cultural readiness among parents:

We often have families that lack cultural adequacy and willingness. All it would take is a little goodwill to cooperate with us and to support their children a little (...). (FGD- EGDNR6-T78)

Some teachers highlighted that for many families, school is not considered a priority (FGD-EGDNR4-T79). An interviewed teacher mentioned that, for many immigrant families, the lack of

parental involvement in students' school life reflects the perception that school is not a priority, as they view it as a minor aspect of their children's lives:

In my opinion, school is not a priority for these families. It's a marginal part of their children's lives, serving only to help them grow and make some money in the future. (INT-EGDNR2-T68)

This teacher discussed the challenges of engaging immigrant parents, sharing an example of a Moroccan mother, noting that some, despite requesting meetings, often fail to attend, leading to frustration in arranging further interactions (INT-EGDNR2-T68)

One head teacher involved in the interviews linked the lack of parental involvement in immigrant student's school life, to the challenges and difficulties they face, often due to linguistic barriers and other factors such as educational background or workload. She explained that parents who have not studied in their home country struggle to assist with homework, particularly when they face language difficulties:

It's obvious that immigrant parents, if they haven't studied in their country, cannot help their child. It's partly a linguistic issue and partly due to the workload. Italian parents, even if they have no educational competence, still face challenges. For immigrant parents, the linguistic factor becomes a significant obstacle, as they often speak the language less proficiently than their children, making it even harder to support them. (INT-EGDNR3-T165)

Similarly, the counselor pointed out the challenges faced by the parents of immigrant students, particularly in relation to the Italian language, which often makes communication difficult. She noted,

We have pupils who have foreign parents, i.e. parents who really have difficulties with the Italian language with whom it is also sometimes a bit difficult to have conversations and who try to follow their children. (EGDR-T24)

However, a teacher mentioned that some Italian families also struggle with understanding the educational system and should be encouraged to seek guidance directly from schools.

- ***Present Parents with Language Difficulties***

The interview with the guidance counselor highlighted the challenges faced by parents of migrant backgrounds in engaging with their children's education due to language barriers. She noted that

despite these difficulties, some parents show significant effort to support their children's academic journey:

And then we have children who have foreign parents, that is, parents who really have difficulties with the Italian language with whom it is also sometimes a bit difficult to have conversations and who try to follow their children. (EGDR-T24)

While some parents make an effort to support their children despite language barriers, others may find it more challenging to provide consistent assistance (EGDR-T24). In certain cases, additional support from external educators complements parental efforts. For instance, the guidance counselor shared an example of a mother who, despite being alone and facing language challenges, ensures her child receives proper care, with assistance from a community center:

The other one, (...) starting from him they did interventions on the whole class of knowledge and group building, class dialogue, class dynamics and in the end they took this little boy to heart and so almost every afternoon he goes to them to do his homework, he is followed by them [educators], even though their centre is actually for older children. (...) he has a mother who, although alone, manages to look after him. (EGDR-T26)

- ***Cultural and Social Influences on Parental Involvement***

Some head teachers noted that cultural and ethnic backgrounds influence the level of family support, distinguishing Italian parents for their greater involvement in their children's education. They highlighted that, in some immigrant families, cultural norms do not include parents, particularly mothers, assisting with homework:

In some families with a foreign background it is not conceived that the mother helps her child with homework. (FG-EGDNR8-T425)

By contrast, Italian families were perceived as more likely to assist their children, despite challenges:

But it is more common for it to happen in the case of Italian families, the mother or father, in the evening after work, dead tired and exhausted help with their children's homework; something that does not happen among foreigners there at all. Either they manage on their own or they don't do their homework. (FG-EGDNR8-T429)

However, some head teachers, including the same participant, questioned whether parental homework assistance is as consistent or deeply rooted in Italian families as might be assumed (FG-EGDNR4-T428 & FG-EGDNR8-T427).

The head teacher emphasized the significant role those parental expectations, particularly in immigrant families, play in students' success. When families prioritize education, students, especially girls, are more likely to perform well. Conversely, without adequate educational support, students may struggle to succeed. As one head teacher explained,

If the family doesn't care whether the daughter studies because she has to stay home and take care of younger siblings, she will perform at a certain level. If the parents care because they understand that education can offer a better future, she will likely perform better. (INT-EGDNR3-T18)

Additionally, some teachers observed that immigrant students, especially girls, tend to show initiative and excel when they receive strong parental support. One teacher attributed their success to both their cultural background and the level of support they receive from their families,

I often come across outstanding foreign students; especially the girls are much more proactive, in my opinion. It depends on the country of origin and the family. Unfortunately, some families are culturally very closed. (INT-EGD4-T16)

One teacher emphasized the importance of cultural and social integration, noting that parental involvement is also influenced by how integrated families are in their local environment. She also noted that the more integrated a family is, the more likely they are to support their child's integration into society (INT-EGDNR3-T54). This teacher highlighted that the parent's educational level influences their engagement in their children's school life, noting the minor number of educated immigrant parents compared to Italians:

There are some parents who have a good level of education. Of course, they are few; those who are foreign graduates are not many compared to Italians. (INT-EGDNR3-T68)

Teacher-Parents interaction

This category encompasses three key themes: *school-family relations, relationship between the school and foreign parents, support for families facing language barriers in communication with schools.*

Each theme highlights distinct aspects of the interactions and challenges within teacher-parent dynamics, particularly in the context of immigrant families.

- ***School-Family Relations***

Head teachers in the focus group highlighted the challenges in fostering effective school-family relationships, particularly the difficulty of creating meaningful communication. One teacher pointed out that engaging families is often a one-sided effort, with limited involvement from parents.

Earlier, none of us mentioned relationships with families, which is usually considered during class council meetings. No one brought it up because it's truly difficult to establish this connection. It's really one-way communication. We try, but it's often easier to focus on the students. Sometimes, they are more responsible; they seem to understand the importance of having a relationship with the teacher. But, on the other hand, they are only 12 or 13 years old. So how can they manage on their own if there's no one at home reinforcing what the school is doing? (FGD- EGDNR7-T90)

Some teachers shared a similar experience, highlighting a sense of disengagement from families, one teacher expressed frustration with the lack of involvement and perceived “an indifference towards the school” (FGD- EGDNR4-T89).

However, one teacher highlighted the benefits of having more engaged families in their third-grade class. She emphasized proactive communication, often calling parents directly instead of relying on the school registry, which some parents neglect. The teacher shared that her personal experience as a mother informed this approach, aiming to ensure continuous contact and strengthen the school-home connection (FGD- EGDNR8-T122). This teacher recognized the difficulties families face but also stressed the importance of staying connected, especially by phone, and appreciated the physical presence of engaged parents when needed. This approach conveys both empathy and a proactive strategy for fostering school-family collaboration:

I guess even following even different registers of various children from different types of schools, I understand that it can send a family into a tailspin then sometimes even at the phone level I can reach them so on that front I consider myself lucky. For all the notices that I have in real time I can give them, and they are also physically present they are

also the ones who ask me to come in person and so this gap I can absolutely overcome but they also have problems of discomfort absolutely. (FGD- EGDNR8-T124)

Another teacher involved with the mentioned classroom, confirmed the positive impact of engaged families, noting a particularly high level of parental involvement during the elections for parent representatives, where their class stood out, with the largest group of parents participating, showcasing an encouraging example of family involvement (FGD- EGDNR7-T129). These teachers observed a notable level of involvement by immigrant families within this classroom, particularly during events like the elections for parent representatives (FGD- EGDNR8-T134).

In conclusion, it can be observed that while challenges in establishing effective communication between school and families persist, teachers' proactive efforts and empathy can help bridge the gap, leading to more meaningful and supportive relationships that benefit both students and their families.

- ***Relationship between the school and foreign parents***

The participants shared diverse experiences regarding interactions with immigrant parents. A head teacher emphasized the possibility of effective verbal communication with immigrant families, noting that at least one parent often possesses sufficient language skills due to their engagement in the workforce (FGD- EGDNR5-T95)

However, another head teacher highlighted a gap in parental involvement in supporting immigrant students with their homework, noting that, in some cases, students themselves act as intermediaries by interpreting and translating school notices for their parents:

In practical classes, for example, many students consult the electronic register on their own to look at homework, to look at notices, and then sometimes they also mediate with their parents by translating what is written there. (FGD- EGDNR5-T91)

- ***Support for Families Facing Language Barriers in Communication with Schools***

Head teachers recurrently shared their experiences of addressing communication challenges with parents who have limited language proficiency. Teachers noted that in some cases, family members with stronger language skills acted as translators during meetings. One teacher recounted:

As for the council meetings we had pupils who were foreigners, so there was the sister who translated, but we were just a lot of people online, so I joined for example S.(the guidance teacher) who was responsible because I was the mediator anyway and they knew them more, sometimes I have to do.(FGD-EGDNR4-T515)

Teachers also emphasized the essential role of cultural mediators in bridging communication gaps between schools and immigrant families, particularly valuable in overcoming language barriers and assisting families in understanding the Italian education system. Their involvement enables better parental engagement with the school (FGD-EGDNR4-T515). Interview data reinforced the importance of these mediators in facilitating communication and supporting the integration of immigrant families into the school environment (INT-EGDNR3-T60; INT-EGDNR3-T62).

It's not exactly a dedicated office, but there is a designated role for intercultural matters. When a student arrives from abroad, if the parents speak Italian, we interact without any issues. For those who don't, we have cultural mediators. They're often used to communicate with parents, to understand their needs, and to help place the students in appropriate classes. (INT-EGDNR3-T62)

However, the teacher pointed out that school often takes the initiative to inform parents about these resources, as many are unaware of their existence:

Usually, it's the school that requests the mediators because some parents don't even know such resources exist. (...) I put myself in their shoes. If I were in their situation, I wouldn't know where to start or who to turn to. So, the school often introduces these services, but sometimes the parents don't even know what to ask for. (INT-EGDNR3-T64)

The involvement of mediators was described as critical for in-person meetings, requiring careful coordination to accommodate both parents and children:

Last year we were able to see each other in presence; that is, the mediator comes, even there the appointment. The mediator was worried; so there too we have to find a time when the parents are there with the children no there, together, we look for another time to talk about the school of orientation. (FGD-EGDNR4-T517)

Despite these challenges, some teachers commended the school's efforts in creating a welcoming environment, stressing the importance of involving both students and their families in integration processes (INT-EGDNR3-T64).

4.5.3.2 Summary of Insights about the class system

In summary, the data from head teachers in the focus group and the guidance counselor regarding the class system indicated the experience of a heterogeneous school context. According to this data, third-grade class groups were perceived as highly diverse. This diversity was attributed to the presence of students with immigrant backgrounds, as well as variations in sociocultural and educational levels. Heterogeneity was seen as both enriching and challenging, as maintaining an equitable and inclusive classroom environment required significant effort.

The data also provided insights into the enrollment of newly arrived students. According to this data, these students are sometimes placed in lower-grade classes than their age group in order to acclimate to their new environment and, in particular, to develop the language skills required for instruction. These students receive literacy instruction during class hours. The data highlighted the experiences of newly arrived immigrant students who showed improvements in both their language skills and integration into the school.

Another challenge highlighted by the data was parents' engagement in school activities and their interaction with teachers. The data revealed disparities in parental collaboration. Participants frequently expressed their perception of a lack of parental involvement, which affected both Italian and immigrant students. The reasons attributed to parental disengagement, particularly for immigrant families, included challenges related to life circumstances, language barriers, educational background, cultural norms, and differing cultural expectations. Some participants shared negative perspectives, attributing this lack of collaboration to a perceived lack of interest in their children's education or not considering it a priority. Some participants shared positive perspectives, recounting experiences and narratives about reciprocal interactions with parents. The data also highlighted resources to facilitate interaction with parents, such as cultural and linguistic mediators.

4.5.4 Orientation

4.5.4.1 Exploring Orientation Through Head Teachers and Guidance Counselor' Perspectives

The perspectives shared in the following pages are from the school's guidance counselor and head teachers. The guidance counselor supports students in their academic choices and helps them transition between educational levels. Head teachers, on the other hand, play a key role in students' education by fostering strong relationships with students as both administrators and teachers throughout lower secondary school.

The interview with the counselor offered insights into the institutional strategies and policies designed to assist immigrant students, the challenges they face, and the role of orientation in shaping their educational trajectories. The counselor's perspective provided a unique lens for understanding the processes and challenges of supporting students in their academic transitions. As someone directly involved in advising students and coordinating orientation activities, the counselor bridges the gap between institutional policies and individual student needs. In the present study the guidance counselor through a review responded to our queries about the orientation offering a deeper understanding about the process and figures associated to the transition to the higher secondary school.

Head teachers also are key figures in managing relationships with families, particularly in resolving conflicts involving the teaching staff. Their position provides them with a comprehensive perspective on the orientation policies implemented within their schools.

The following pages will summarize and compare findings from the macro category of academic orientation, specifically from the perspective of head teachers involved in focus groups and interviews and the guidance counselor. The categories explored are: *parental involvement in orientation, peer influence on school track choices: role of the guidance counselor, orientation activities for teachers, orientation council, school choice for students with a migrant background: orientation activities: orientation perspectives*. Additionally, two categories emerged exclusively from the data provided by the interview with the guidance counselor focusing on the themes of *re-orientation and Digital Tools and Online Guidance Management*.

Parental Involvement in Orientation

This section examines these themes through the lens of focus group data, and interviews with head teachers and the counselor, shedding light on how family involvement influences orientation and school track decisions. The category comprises themes such as *family support, collaboration between school in the orientation process, parental challenges in school choice decisions, parents'*

opinion, parental influence and student autonomy: perspectives on Italian and immigrant families, parental expectations and inspirations, family expectations and aspirations: a comparison between Italian and immigrant families, parents' educational/cultural level, incongruence of parents' expectations with students' aptitudes and the role of parents as role models.

- ***Family support in orientation***

All focus group participants emphasized the critical role of families in supporting students during the transition to higher secondary school. One teacher highlighted the importance of family involvement in orientation activities such as open days and school visits. However, she also noted the disparity between students who receive family support and those who do not:

The family has a lot of influence, however(...) in the last experience I had with the third grade C and many children are supported by their families to go to open days, to do information days, but many, on the other hand, are absolutely absent. I have boys in the third grade where I'm praying every day who ask their families to take them to an open day and who say that I didn't go because the family behind it isn't there. (FG-EGDNR4-220)

The guidance counselor emphasized the role and influence of parents in the orientation process. She noted the challenges involved in working with children who struggle to understand their own needs and aspirations, as well as with parents who face difficulties in understanding and supporting their children effectively.

You have to struggle a bit, struggle in quotes with children who have difficulty understanding themselves and with parents who have difficulty understanding their children (EGDR-T114)

The participant noted that some parents tend to follow either their child's decision or the recommendations provided during the guidance process, with minimal involvement in critically evaluating or contributing to the choice (EGDR-T108).

- ***Collaboration Between School and Families in the Orientation Process***

Interviews emphasize the importance of collaboration between schools and families in understanding students' aptitudes and supporting informed decision-making. Teachers noted that these interactions give parents new perspectives on their children's abilities, helping them make more thoughtful educational choices (INT-EGDNR1-T59). A teacher stressed that collaboration is key to guiding families towards better choices for their children's future:

Life will be very hard, because if you do something you don't like, and you always come back to square one. In fact, they are dramas because you lose precious energy, so I'm always beating about trying to find out who they are. The problem is that school alone is not enough. And perhaps families really need to work on this a bit too. Helping families to realize that if you don't start from the individual with their aptitudes, talents and personality, you can't then also help them to find, to make them find their own way. (INT-EGDNR1-T60)

However, one headteacher noted the freedom of families in decision-making regarding the student's track choice, despite the guidance council's recommendation.

I think it also happened to some other colleagues, to talk to a parent. (...) it usually happens, but once then the guidance advice is given. Then the parents are free to do what they want, i.e. in the end they can listen to the teacher's advice or not. (INT-EGDNR3-T97)

- ***Parental Challenges in School Choice Decisions***

The headteachers provided experiences of several factors contributing to the lack of parental involvement and support in students' track decisions. One teacher noted that school choice is often influenced by proximity, peer influence, or superficial advice, with limited parental guidance due to a lack of knowledge about educational tracks (FG-EGDNR4-T220).

Another teacher noted that the complexity of the orientation process is a significant barrier, given the wide range of educational tracks available. The abundance of options makes it challenging for families to fully understand and support their children's choices:

There are so many [schools]now, so many paths that actually knowing them all and knowing what I'm going to do is difficult (FG-EGDNR4-T258)

Additionally, a participant emphasized that immigrant families often face unique challenges during the orientation process due to a lack of resources and tools to navigate the system effectively:

[foreign parents to support pupils during orientation] do not have the resources, the tools and do not have...(FG-EGDNR4-T241)

- ***Parents' opinion***

One of the head teachers involved in focus group shared her observation about parents who are disengage in student's schooling, during orientation exert significant influence during the school decision-making process. She noted that this influence often disregards the students' skills and preferences, leading to mismatches between the chosen educational path and the student's abilities or interests:

Paradoxically, the family is not present during the year, when we need them, when they have to choose high school, the family has a huge influence on their choice. Often I see that they don't go along with, we try to do here the work on themselves that the boys had done during the year to arrive at a choice, environment in which they are placed so maybe schools that are difficult from the point of view of the context or from the cognitive point of view, they are misdirected so then they change school and this is something I perceived listening sometimes to the coordinators after the orientation advice we give in January (FG-EGDNR7-181)

Teachers in interviews echoed this sentiment, describing how parents sometimes impose their opinions without considering alternative options or the child's preferences. One teacher recounted a conversation with a student that highlighted the strong influence of parental decisions on educational choices. The student mentioned attending a lyceum because it was deemed the best option by his mother, without exploring other schools. This example illustrates how parental opinions can significantly shape students' academic paths, sometimes limiting their exposure to broader possibilities (INT-EGDNR3-T76).

One teacher discussed the challenges when parents insist on a certain educational path for their child, despite the child's disagreement. She emphasized that forcing a student into a path they don't want can create resentment and negatively affect their engagement and performance, as the student feels the decision was imposed by the parent. (INT-EGDNR2-T64)

- ***Parental Influence and Student Autonomy: Perspectives on Italian and Immigrant Families***

Interviewed teachers shared contrasting perspectives on the influence of parental opinions and the level of student autonomy when comparing Italian and with an immigrant family. One teacher observed that parental influence is more prominent in immigrant families. She This teacher also pointed out that Italian families tend to allow more freedom in educational choices:

In the foreign context the family's influence is greater than in the Italian context. That is to say, it gives me the impression that the parent is the one who decides more compared to the family of Italians where the parent decides in part (INT-EGDNR2-T62)

I think it is because of how the family is seen. (...) in Italian families children are freer to choose. Here, in my opinion, regardless of what the parent decides also because it is something I insist on (INT-EGDNR2-T64)

In contrast, another teacher expressed a different perspective, observing greater autonomy among students from immigrant families. This was attributed to the parents' lack of preconceived notions and their reliance on schools for information, which may foster a more open approach:

Kids who come from outside are a bit freer. In being able to choose. Because there is less prejudice. That is, I think that for some parents the fact that they come to school (...) that they get information even if on their own. For better or for worse maybe they leave them free, no? to take various paths a little bit because maybe many especially with respect to the social situation because then it also obviously depends on that; not knowing I have the feeling that sometimes they are more willing. If they see their children sure to take a path they let them. Maybe a little more freedom. (INT-EGDNR1-T37)

This autonomy was also linked to immigrant parents' limited knowledge of available educational options. This independence arises when parents are unfamiliar with the school system, leaving students to navigate decisions on their own. However, this teacher viewed this outcome with mixed feelings about its overall impact (INT-EGDNR1-T43).

- ***Parents' Educational/Cultural Level***

The guidance counselor emphasized the significant influence of parents' educational and cultural backgrounds in the orientation process. She noted that parents with university degrees are often better informed and more familiar with available opportunities. However, she highlighted that the issue goes beyond cultural or educational background, emphasizing the importance of a parent's ability to actively seek information and ask questions. She observed that many children come from families where parents have limited literacy, which can hinder their engagement in their child's educational decisions.

Obviously, if you have parents who are both university graduates and who therefore have some knowledge, it is greater that they know the world that they inform themselves. Many children have parents who are semi-illiterate (...)it's not so much the cultural background; it's also the ability of the parent to ask. (EGDR-T108)

The counselor highlighted that even some immigrant children have parents with university degrees, though these qualifications may not be recognized in their host country, often leading them to take on menial jobs. Despite this, these parents possess a strong cultural foundation that motivates them to support their children actively.

Foreign children also have parents who are university graduates, so that in their country they may not be worth the degree here, they do much more menial jobs, but they have a cultural base there that allows them to say I'll take them to the open day, I want them to do, to follow their aspirations. Yes, even there (EGDR-T108)

In line with these observations one of the interviewed headteachers pointed out that parents with university degrees sometimes impose their academic aspirations on their children, regardless of the child's strengths or interests. The headteacher noted instances where parents insisted on a scientific track for their child, even when the student struggled with math, attributing this pressure to the parents' own educational background and expectations (*INT- EGDNR1-T45*).

This experience aligns with Bourdieu's concept of economic, cultural, and social capital (1986), which highlights the influence of parents' education and cultural background on children's educational paths. It also reflects research showing that families whose cultural practices align with school values give their children a distinct advantage (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004; Hällsten & Szulkin, 2009).

- ***Parental expectations and inspirations***

Headteachers noted the significant impact of parents' unrealized aspirations on students' educational choices. One teacher in focus group shared how students often expressed a desire to fulfill ambitions their parents couldn't achieve:

I have kids who have always said from the beginning that I want to do what my dad didn't do (FG-EGDNR4-T243).

Similarly, interviews revealed how parents' unfulfilled dreams shaped students' paths. One teacher recounted a story of a Moldovan student whose mother, who had been unable to pursue law, pushed her daughter to achieve what she could not (*INT-EGDNR3-T88*).

In another example, the teacher described how a student's choice reflected their parents' aspirations for themselves:

[The children] continue I'll go to that school, because my father wanted to go to that school. (FG-EGDNR4-T245)

These examples highlight how parental aspirations, both realized and unrealized, can significantly shape students' educational paths, with children often internalizing their parents' unfulfilled dreams and pursuing careers aligned with family ambitions

- ***Family Expectations and Aspirations: A Comparison Between Italian and Immigrant Families***

The analysis of interviews highlighted differences in family expectations between Italian families and those with immigrant backgrounds. One teacher noted the influence of traditional Italian family expectations on students' educational choices (*INT- EGDNR1-T41*). She observed that Italian families often favor classical or scientific education, which can create challenges for students (*INT- EGDNR1-T43*). The teacher attributed this to generational norms and prejudices:

In Italy, on the other hand, I think there are more families that have prejudices, and so a little bit on the basis of attitudes of maybe they expect more traditional, canonical paths. A little bit, because I think it is also a generational fact, in the sense that the parents who are now more or less my age are people who grew up in a context in which things were actually simpler from the point of view of future career choice. Now I think things have changed. (INT-EGDNR1-T37)

In contrast, a teacher highlighted how economic pressures in immigrant families lead to prioritizing quick, financially rewarding careers over academically demanding paths. Families with many children often push them toward faster employment, like football or manual labor, so they can contribute to household expenses quickly, rather than pursuing longer educational paths that take more time to yield financial stability (*INT-EGDNR2-T9*).

Some teachers observed that immigrant families, had more immediate economic concerns. These families often prioritized quick entry into the workforce over further academic education. One teacher shared an experience with specifically with Chinese students:

I was sad to realize that some very good Chinese girls who would have done very well in lyceum were instead directed by their families to three-year schools, because the family's objective was for them to learn to sew and then send them

to the various workshops scattered around Italy because they even then went to Tuscany to work in a factory and there was no way. So, the girls were in tears because they realized that they would have a very good opportunity here in Italy, but their families were extremely against it (INT-EGDNR2-T9)

- ***Incongruence of Parents' Expectations with Students' Aptitudes***

The headteachers highlighted cases where parents selected educational tracks for their children without taking their abilities into account. They noted a recurring tendency among some parents to prioritize prestigious or traditional paths, such as enrolling their children in scientific lyceums, without considering the students' unique strengths and aptitudes. This disconnect often reflects the difficulty parents face in aligning their aspirations with their child's individual potential (*INT-EGDNR1-T45*). Some teacher recounted the experience of a student under a support program with significant educational challenges who was enrolled in a scientific lyceum, despite concerns about its suitability. Accounts from the interviews highlighted a student in support programs and Special Educational Needs (SEN) program whose educational aspirations were heavily influenced by mothers' ambitions. The teacher explained:

I remember that a few years ago I had a great difficulty because there was a boy with support program who had got it into his head that he had to go to the scientific high school, but objectively he couldn't make it, his mother was stubborn that he had to do it because she told me that I can't stop my son from... but I say God, avoid frustrations (...) so it was more difficult to convince his mother and then she enrolled in the scientific lyceum and they couldn't be persuaded at all. Sometimes it happens that they make choices (...) it can happen that there are those who succeed well for God's sake, that is, those who then commit themselves, but there are those who then remain. (INT-EGDNR3-T93)

This woman, for example, has extremely high expectations. I mean, the girl [with special educational needs] says, 'I want to be a dentist,' and it's not feasible—she's completely influenced by her mother. So, in this case, we find ourselves at the opposite extreme. (INT-EGDNR2-T23)

Such cases illustrate the mismatch between parental aspirations and students' realistic capabilities, underscoring the challenges educators face when guiding families toward more suitable academic paths that align with the child's strengths, while balancing encouragement with the need to prevent future frustration and academic disengagement.

- ***Parents as role models***

The teachers in focus group highlighted the critical role of parents as models for their children. One teacher observed that Italian students, in particular, often emulate their families, reflecting a strong assimilation to parental behavior (FGD_EGDNR8-T265).

Another teacher shared a negative perception about the impact of parents who lack engagement and exhibit “laziness”, recounting an example where a student described their mother’s inactivity:

They don't work so I don't know if they have citizenship income. Anyway, they do nothing, but nothing, they are lazy parents, they see parents who are only in front of the phone. One tells me my mother is always in bed with the phone from morning till evening, I say but she works, no, she has nothing (FG_D_EGDNR4-T305)

This lack of parental influence is seen as a contributing factor to the students' struggles with motivation and direction in life (FGD_EGDNR4-T307; FG_D_EGDNR4-T309).

Peer Influence on School Track Choices

Research highlights how peer relationships can influence academic choices, motivation, and success, particularly among immigrant students. For instance, Baker (2017) examined how peer and social support in areas like course selection and motivation can affect students’ persistence and success. This section explores these dynamics further, focusing on how peer relationships contribute to the educational experience of immigrant students. The key themes covered under this category are: *the impact of peer’s choices, the sibling replacing the parent's support, the role of siblings, and family members’ experiences on school decisions*. These themes explore how interactions with peers and siblings can shape students' decisions, including both positive and negative influences, and the challenges arising from a lack of support or self-confidence

- ***The Impact of Peer’s Choices on Track Decisions***

The participants of the focus group shared varied perspectives on the influence of peers in students' decisions regarding school orientation and track choices. One head teacher observed that peer influence tends to dominate only in the absence of other significant guiding factors, such as family involvement or a strong relationship with teachers. Without these supports, students may rely on their peers when making decisions:

Only if no other factors are present in my opinion. That is, if the family is missing; if it has no relationship with the teacher, then I follow and or do ...[peer choice].(FGD- EGDNR7-T399)

However, teachers highlighted that the extent of peer influence varies depending on the student's determination and independence. Some students prioritize their education and willingly separate from friends to pursue the right school for their goals:

The conditioning of the friend, of the best friend, even though there are also more determined kids who are also willing to leave their mates. I say this because my son had to choose middle school and so he chose not because all his friends were there but also because of the school. There are kids who, regardless of friendships choose that school a bit if they think it is an important school. (FGD- EGDNR4-T393)

Similarly, the guidance counselor emphasized the strong influence of peer groups on students' orientation decisions. She shared a critical assessment, noting that many students lack the confidence to make independent choices, often aligning their decisions with those of their friends or siblings. According to this narrative, this behavior stems from a fear of change and a lack of awareness that new friendships will form as they transition.

[The peer group] has always been very influential because they lack the courage to make their own choice; they don't realize that they will make new friends anyway. Many simply follow their friends or siblings. (EGDR-T102)

On the other hand, some teachers emphasized that students may follow their peers' choices to avoid feelings of abandonment or fear of loneliness in a new school environment (FGD- EGDNR7-T401). Yet, social connections often drive students' choices. Teachers involved in the interviews that social connections significantly influence students' educational choices, with some students opting for schools based on where their friends are enrolling. The fear of feeling isolated during the transition to secondary school can lead them to prioritize companionship over academic considerations, particularly when they feel uncertain about their options (INT- EGDNR3-T122). Another teacher interviewed noted that both Italian and immigrant students are influenced by their peers. One teacher highlighted how uncertainty about future educational paths can heighten the influence of peer decisions. This behavior, they noted, is common among both immigrant and native students, who may follow their friends' choices when feeling unsure about their own direction (INT-EGDNR2-T56).

The interviewees emphasized the negative effects of peer influence on track choices, particularly when these choices do not align with students' skills and aptitudes. These teachers shared examples of how peer choices can lead to students selecting difficult tracks without considering their abilities or the level of effort required (*INT-EGDNR2-T56*). Intendances comprised cases where several students decided to pursue a track following one peer initiated the choice. These cases included students who had yet to demonstrate strong commitment or aptitude in key subjects like mathematics, despite their potential.

Some teachers highlighted that students who are capable of pursuing more ambitious tracks may end up following their friends into less challenging options by following peers.

[peers] doesn't always have a positive effect of course sometimes it does; maybe they are on the same level and it's fine but sometimes they want to follow their friend, because she enrolls in a school that is a bit too high for a kid, but also in a school that is too low maybe one can do more and chooses something different because there are friends who make that choice. (INT-EGDNR3-T124)

- ***The sibling replacing the parent's support***

Head teachers discussed the significant role older siblings play in influencing students' track choices, particularly when parental involvement is limited. One teacher identified three common scenarios where older siblings take on this responsibility. The teacher shared a negative perception about how in some cases, parents push students toward the educational path chosen by older siblings due to “laziness” or convenience, as the path is already familiar, and the experience and information are in place. In other instances, parents may rely on older siblings to manage bureaucratic processes or provide guidance when they are unable to do so themselves, often due to work demands or difficulty navigating educational systems.

Or older brothers. So, with three possibilities, and the school choice apart from laziness, at that point I think not only laziness, I also think of an ease, of a path already started. If these families fail between work or inability to understand just all the bureaucracy and everything, then they say, 'I have already done this'. Things for the eldest son and I find it started. Well, you take care of it,' an elder son tells his sister, 'we do the registration, you show him the way, you take the same bus and do the route together, you do your homework with the same books. So, it's also a kind of facilitation. (FGD- EGDNR8-T431)

The head teachers emphasized that, ideally, parental involvement is crucial in the relationship with the school. However, due to economic and social challenges, some families are unable to fulfill this role, and older siblings step in to support their younger siblings' educational journey.

Some of the teachers highlighted how the absence of parental involvement often forces older siblings to take on caregiving roles, leaving little time for their own studies (FGD- EGDNR4-T415).

- ***Influence of family members' experiences on school choice***

A head teacher in focus group highlighted that sometimes students are influenced by their older siblings and follow their choices without considering any differences in their own needs or preferences and abilities (FGD- EGDNR4-T404). One participant shared an example of a student who chose to follow her sister's path, despite evident differences between them:

Regardless if the siblings were totally different people; I have had many cases here: very good siblings, where the second one goes; but I go with my sister and there was no way. She went to her sister's school, no way. (FGD-EGDNR4-T406)

The guidance counselor reflected on the negative impact of peer and sibling influence on students' orientation decisions. She noted that siblings often have different predispositions and inclinations, making their choices unsuitable for each other. Similarly, many students are easily swayed by their friends, highlighting their vulnerability and need for greater support during this critical decision-making process.

It can affect them but usually in a negative way because (...) siblings don't always have exactly the same obviously predispositions, the same inclinations (...) it may suit them or not. But many are easily influenced by their friends. (EGDR-T102)

In line with these reflections, according to the data from the interviews family experiences also play a strong role, as students often feel compelled to stick with familiar paths taken by their parents or siblings. These students opt for the same track simply because it was a reality they were already acquainted with through their family (INT- EGDNR3-T78).

Some teachers highlighted that the tendency to follow family members' educational paths is common among both immigrant and native students. This pattern, driven by a preference for

familiarity and a desire to avoid the uncertainty of unfamiliar options, reflects a broader reliance on known experiences when making academic decisions (INT- EGDNR3-T80).

Another teacher emphasized that for students with a migrant background, the success of a cousin or relative at a particular school can be especially influential, even when the chosen path might not suit their abilities:

Among the foreigners on the other hand, the fact that their cousin went to that school, did well there and so on, is extremely motivating for them. (INT-EGDNR2-T60)

They [pupils with a migrant background] say ah and my cousin went there he's fine, I'll go there too, even if you tell me it wouldn't be the right school for me. (INT-EGDNR2-T62)

One of the participants of the focus group linked this phenomenon to a broader lack of parental willingness to explore new opportunities (FGD-EGDNR8-T433). Another teacher shared a negative perception about how this pattern of following siblings often emerges when parents are absent or display a "laziness" in providing guidance during the decision-making process:

Then in my opinion this happens more [pandering to siblings]. Just where there is no right and just laziness in helping. (FGD- EGDNR6-T407)

Others pointed out that families with a greater investment in their children's growth tend to encourage them to forge their own path, while those relying on convenience may perpetuate patterns of repetition. In these families, where siblings strive to differentiate themselves, there is a clear investment in personal growth. In contrast, following a sibling's choice often reflects a lack of effort to make an independent decision (FGD- EGDNR6-T410)

Role of the Guidance Counselor

Guidance is not just about providing more or less detailed information about different types of schools, but about understanding how that information can be used and elaborated within the personal stories, the self-image that students have developed of themselves as learners, and the expectations of their families (Ciccarelli, 2019). The present category covers the three key themes regarding the role and activities of the guidance counselor. These are as follows: *presence and activities of the guidance counselor, meetings with parents, classroom interventions and*

orientation, interaction with students for guidance, collection of information, and coordination with class teachers.

These themes illustrate the multifaceted approach of guidance counselor in facilitating students' transition to high school, ensuring alignment between their aspirations, abilities, and available educational opportunities.

- ***Presence and Activities of the Guidance Counselor***

Head teachers highlighted the challenges of providing effective guidance in the face of increasingly complex educational pathways, noting the role of a designated guidance counselor (INT-EGDNR3-T22). While the head teachers contribute to the orientation process by offering advice in cases with specific considerations (INT-EGDNR1-T14) and completing recommendation questionnaires (INT-EGDNR2-T3), they acknowledged the difficulty of keeping up with the diversity of study programs. One teacher reflected on the dramatic expansion of high school options over the years:

In these 30 years of teaching, high school has changed dramatically. That is, at the beginning of my career there were practically two high schools: there was the teacher training college and there were a few other schools. Now, within lyceum and each school there are six, seven, eight, ten courses of study, so that even for us teachers it is... unless one is a guidance counsellor, it is extremely difficult to guide the students specifically. (INT-EGDNR2-T3)

The headteachers in the focus group highlighted the importance of a dedicated teacher overseeing orientation activities. One participant described how the guidance counselor not only delivers direct classroom interventions explaining study programs and schools but also provides a support desk for parents, offering guidance and answering questions both for students and families in need of further assistance (FGD- EGDNR8-T144).

Teachers highlighted the guidance counselor's role in informing students about educational tracks, with one head teacher noting the use of classroom sessions to provide an overview of high schools (INT-EGDNR3-T32). Another head teacher highlighted the meetings organized specifically for parents, particularly those of foreign background, to facilitate informed decision-making. The guidance sessions include individual appointments where the counselor meets with both the student and their parents to discuss educational pathways and available options. This personalized approach ensures that families, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, receive tailored support and a comprehensive understanding of the choices available (INT-EGDNR2-T46).

- ***Meetings with Parents for Orientation***

Headteachers in focus group described the orientation meetings led by the guidance counselor, focusing on their structure and the challenges encountered in engaging parents. These meetings typically begin with a general session at the start of the school year. However, attendance at these sessions is often limited, with few parents participating (FGD-EGDNR4-T490; FGD-EGDNR4-T491).

Indeed, the guidance counselor shared that while in past there were collective meeting with the parents at the beginning, now she provides shorter meetings online in order to offer more tailored guidance.

I thought I would play those collegial meeting hours in the form of a counter and make available first in presence now on Meet small 10-15 minutes slots to meet with parents to meet with stay-at-home parents [Online] (EGDR-T12)

In addition to these general meetings, online private sessions are offered upon request, allowing parents, students, and the guidance counselor to discuss track choices in a more personalized setting (FGD-EGDNR4-T496). A teacher highlighted the importance of fostering dialogue between parents and children during school orientation meetings. They described how the guidance counselor works with teachers to engage families, particularly those uncertain or uninvolved, to encourage meaningful discussions about school choices:

But it has caught on; quite a bit; more for the S. (guidance teacher) who goes to the various classes. I would mediate at least four who are uncertain; because then maybe we help the ones who are never seen and who are just totally foggy. It tells me how many you have for the class, but imagine I have a class where there are really four five who are not even parents. So, it's a stimulus also for the parents to connect, to let people talk, to bring this discussion to the table; because I believe that for some families school is the last thing on their minds. (FGD-EGDNR4-T507)

These meetings, whether general or personalized, aim to bridge gaps in communication and decision-making, ensuring that students and their families receive the necessary guidance to make informed educational choices.

- ***Classroom Interventions and Orientation***

The counselor described her class-based activities as a resource offered to students to support their orientation process. The participant explained that the primary goal of these class-based activities

is to help students clarify their ideas about their future educational paths by January. She noted that the aim of this program is to guide them towards informed decisions, acknowledging that while these decisions may never be perfect, her years of observation provide valuable insights into the students' strengths and needs.

The counsellor explained how she engages students by stimulating their thinking, addressing questions about upper secondary school, including subjects, study load, schedules, and future pathways during her interactions with students. She answers both general and personal inquiries, often collaborating with teachers like the Italian instructor, who knows the students better.

I go into the classroom and try to raise some questions especially about high school ,what's in store for me, the subjects, the study load, the timetables proper. How many hours of how many subjects they will do next year, what they can do afterwards. In short, I try to answer their general questions, although some also ask personal questions, but then the literature teacher who knows them best. (EGDR-T30)

- ***Interaction with Students for Guidance***

Regarding challenges in interaction with students for orientation the participant described varying experiences during orientation sessions, encountering both attentive and disruptive classes. She noted that some students exhibit significant behavioral issues, often compounded by a lack of support from their families.

There are kids who have big behavior problems. You are not the teacher, so you also have to keep quiet, so the family doesn't support them. (EGDR-T98)

- ***Collection of Information by the Guidance Counselor with Input from Class Teachers***

The head teachers described how the guidance counselor gathers information collaboratively with class teachers to align students' aptitudes with appropriate school tracks. They noted that, during sessions with parents, the guidance counselor acts independently as the head teachers are not present. To ensure comprehensive guidance, the counselor seeks input from teachers who are familiar with the students. One participant explained how the guidance counselor consults teachers to gain a deeper understanding of a student's abilities and potential educational paths:

Another thing that guidance counselor does is that the moment I get an e-mail in which a parent asks for their child, she contacts the teacher of that class, perhaps matching that child's aptitude, and asks in your opinion what skills

does he or she have? Could we illustrate this type of school? so sometimes it also obviously confronts us teachers. It happened to me, so I know. (FGD-EGDNR8-T510)

The participants in focus group emphasized that this reliance on teachers' insights is particularly important because the guidance counselor does not teach all classes and, therefore, may not know every student personally (FGD-EGDNR8-T514).

The counselor explained that to provide tailored guidance to parents seeking advice on educational paths, she collects information on the child's academic performance and consults with colleagues about the child's progress, family situation, and any challenges they may face. This allows her to provide personalized guidance based on the parents' requests (EGDR-T12).

Orientation Activities for Teachers

We aimed to understand the role of subject teachers and head teachers in orientation and the development of track decisions. This category covers the following key themes: *promoting self-awareness, teachers' activities to promote self-awareness, guiding students through misaligned educational choices, personalized advice based on the student's knowledge , sharing of personal experience by the teacher , teacher's advice for school choice considering parental support, considerations for school dropout recovery after eighth grade, teacher's expectations , pupils' request for confrontation with the teacher, teacher-led orientation and guidance.*

These themes examine how teachers, particularly literature teachers, contribute to guiding students and the collaborative efforts among educators in supporting students' decision-making.

- ***Promoting Self-Awareness and Personal Development***

The teachers in the focus group emphasized the importance of fostering self-awareness and personal development as integral aspects of students' growth. They highlighted the need for continuous effort and reflection in shaping one's identity and making informed decisions (FGD-EGDR6-320 & FGD-EGDNR5-328).

The important thing in my opinion is to insist on the fact that it is important to form oneself, to commit oneself, to be aware, to be constant even to be in a choice, to be in a situation. (FGD-EGDNR5-328)

Individual interviews reinforced this observation and revealed strategies like encouraging self-assessment and constructive conversation (INT-EGDNR2-T33). Headteachers emphasized the importance of considering personal development over job prospects when choosing an educational path. In classroom they encouraged students to focus not just on the profession they want to pursue, but on the kind of person they want to become, suggesting that passions, aptitudes, and personal growth should guide their decisions rather than solely job expectations (FGD-EGDNR5-318).

More than, what job do you want to do for them the question is the person you want to be because the job too I thought of one job then I did another, this we are all a little bit still like that and we know; maybe someone knows the right job. By the way more than the job it's the passion, it's the aptitude, the talent that one has, one wants to bring to fruition, one wants to nurture skills, knowledge. (FGD-EGDNR4-332)

Another theme that emerged regarding the long-term vision of students' educational paths is the importance of aligning their aspirations with a realistic understanding of their chosen career paths. Interviews highlighted the need for students to actively explore and research their desired professions, gaining firsthand experiences or insights from professionals in the field. One teacher emphasized this point, noting that students often hold incomplete or idealized perceptions of certain careers (INT-EGDNR1-T33).

Additionally, a teacher in focus group highlighted the influence of parental expectations, particularly when rooted in a desire for social or economic advancement. She stressed the importance of helping students recognize and navigate these dynamics (FGD-EGDNR4-249). Similarly, the interviewed teachers emphasized the importance of guiding students to navigate and to select their educational paths independently. Teachers both in interviews and discussions stressed the need for students to prioritize their own interests and aspirations over external influences, such as parental preferences or peer choices (INT-EGDNR3-T126; INT-EGDNR2-T56 &INT-EGDNR2-T56).

- ***Teachers' Activities to Promote Self-Awareness***

Headteachers, particularly literature teachers, emphasized their complementary role in fostering self-awareness among students. They described how subject-specific activities serve a propaedeutic function, running parallel to formal orientation program (FG-EGDNR6-170 & FG-EGDNR4-171). These activities aim to help students develop self-knowledge, strengthen their willpower, and focus on their interests and future goals. One literature teacher explained how she

integrates self-awareness activities into her curriculum, encouraging students to reflect on their interests, commitment, and aspirations:

There is also an intervention, at least I speak as a teacher of literature so a recognizing path, not so much as regards illustration of schools but more oriented on self-knowledge, what I like and know how to do, how much in study, commitment, life projects, what I am willing to do. That's what we work on, a bit always at the end of the second especially I usually start with the thirds this work, as soon as they arrive in October. I focus this work, so that they focus on the scope, the interest and the willingness to commit, then translated into the scope and the level of education, and the type of high school. (FGD-EGDNR6-168)

Another literature teacher highlighted the marginal, yet significant role subject teachers play in orientation. The teacher clarified that her role in orientation is more about helping students develop self-awareness and understand their aptitudes rather than giving direct career advice. She emphasized that students should focus on exploring their potential and trust that their path will become clearer over *time* (FGD-EGNR4-334)

Echoing the head teachers' observations, the guidance counselor emphasized the significant influence of literature teachers in shaping students' choices, pointing out the substantial amount of time they spend with their classes. She explained:

The other figures are the literature teachers because the literature teacher in a third class does from six to eight has 10 hours; that is, if she only does literature, she does six hours if she also does history eight if she also does geography ten. So, they are the teachers who follow the children the most have many hours. (EGDR-T28)

[The literature teachers] usually work with them also from the anthology on reading passages, a little more on self-knowledge, one's own characteristics, skills and various readings, what I would like to do when I grow up, things like that. (EGDR-T28)

She contrasted her limited orientation sessions in the classroom with the more in-depth and continuous engagement that literature teachers have with the students. While she focuses on addressing general questions about high school, such as subjects, study workload, schedules, and future opportunities, literature teachers, who know the students better, provide more personalized guidance and support. Regarding the activities provided by literature teacher she illustrated:

- ***Guiding Students through Misaligned Educational Choices***

Teachers highlighted their approaches to helping students align their school choices with their interests, skills, and potential. One teacher shared how she encourages students to explore alternatives when their chosen path does not match their abilities, while fostering self-reflection:

It's obvious that if someone tells me I want to go to science lyceum but that individual doesn't even know how to study, has no method of study, is not consistent, doesn't care about hours, I tell him look it's a waste of time. But then it will be true. I don't doubt it. But maybe I recommend something else. So, I more than advise; I try to make them understand; I try to help them realize things on their own. (FGD-EG5-334)

Some teachers also described cases where students insisted on pursuing paths that did not match their abilities. One teacher emphasized the importance of gently guiding them toward more suitable choices by advising them in a more direct manner.

A boy, because his brother did a chemical surveyor, also wants to go to this school obviously always family situations with difficulties with second emigration. And there I'm trying almost every day to tell him look you're doing it wrong because (...) he's not there with chemistry with this technical world so he can't make it. (INT-EGDNR1-T27)

Another teacher spoke about a student determined to attend a prestigious scientific lyceum despite academic limitations, involving the student's parent to explain the potential challenges of this decision:

I take the example of that boy who wanted to enroll at all costs in the scientific lyceum. I even called his mother to talk to her and try to explain the situation a bit, to make her understand. (INT-EGDNR3-T97)

Teachers also described instances where students, despite their abilities, chose simpler educational paths. One teacher recalled a highly capable girl who selected a vocational education program with limited opportunities for further study:

It happened that a girl (...) who was very good and very intelligent decided to go for a VET but just I know some hyper-simple stuff I said 'look, but why?' we tried to talk to her. Both at school and during the break and at the orientation fair. But she just doesn't want to. I told her (...)' Why then, by making such a selective and targeted choice, for two or three years, don't you have the possibility to continue?'(...) sometimes you feel even more sorry when you see that they themselves deny you possibilities. (INT-EGDNR1-T31)

Finally, teachers highlighted the potential disconnect between their academic aspirations for students and the educational goals immigrant parents envision for their children. One teacher noted that this mismatch occurs particularly with high-achieving students (INT-EGDNR2-T9).

- ***Personalized advice based on the student's knowledge***

Teachers shared their approaches to offering personalized guidance based on students' strengths and potential, including talents observed in extracurricular activities. One head teacher emphasized the importance of recognizing students' unique talents and interests, even outside traditional academic performance, to guide them toward more appropriate educational tracks. By reviewing subject-specific evaluations and identifying extracurricular strengths, such as proficiency in technology or artistic abilities, teachers can provide tailored recommendations that align better with students' skills and future potential (FGD-EGDNR5-T172).

Additionally, as participants noted all teachers, as well as support program teachers who interact with the student, are expected to actively advise the student (INT-EGDNR3-T22). Interviews also highlighted the role of class teachers, who provide advice based on a variety of factors, including academic performance and potential. One teacher noted:

Usually, the teacher takes various factors into account, and I mean the performance, what the actual performance is, what he has done in these three years. Then you also take into account the potential that a particular kid might have because maybe give him a chance (...). (INT-EGDNR3-T86)

Similarly, the guidance counselor underscored the significance of the collective action of teachers in guiding students' orientation decisions. She highlighted how each teacher, through their subject expertise and time spent with the class, contributes uniquely to the process. While she conducts specific orientation sessions, other teachers, such as those teaching Italian, languages, art, and technology, bring their own perspectives and experiences, providing valuable support that complements her efforts.

When it comes to orientation, it's not just me; I do 6 hours in my class and 3 hours of the class where I do orientation, but Italian teacher does many hours but there's not just Italian; there's also languages, there's also art, there's also technology. Everyone brings their own experience and could do a little more to help these kids. I can't give advice on art, although I obviously know more or less. (EGDR-T104)

- ***Sharing of personal experience by the teacher***

Some headteachers discussed how sharing their own personal experiences, including past mistakes, helps them empathize with students. By acknowledging their own missteps, teachers create an environment where students feel safe to make mistakes, reassuring them the possibility to choose the wrong path and change direction (*FGD_EGDNR6-T449 & FGD_EGDNR6-T449*). One participant explained:

A teacher must place himself on a human level, not just a professional one, because a teacher seems a bit of a figure put there already. He should say I to get to be this I was a student first, I studied these subjects. What did I like best? I was doing badly in these subjects, so also imperfectly. (FGD-EGDNR8-340)

teachers also use their own journeys to inspire curiosity. One teacher shared how discussing their university experiences, including showing photos, sparked interest in certain subjects among students:

Both about what one has studied and what one has done. I talk a lot in the university era. Sometimes when I also showed photographs of what I did, of the environment. So probably to those who are interested in these kinds of subjects, I awaken an interest, arousing curiosity and questions. Others, however, probably have this kind of relationship with other disciplines. (FGD-EGDNR8-338)

- ***Teacher's advice for school choice considering parental support***

The narratives shared by teachers in the focus group revealed how they perceive family support as a crucial factor in students' educational decisions. One teacher expressed concern about the risks of inadequate parental involvement, noting that students without family support are more likely to drop out and struggle to re-enter education:

Where there is no family and where there is the risk to really drop out of school because there is so much; either because of immigration or because of the socio-cultural level. I feel the burden to tell this kid to go to school right away because if he makes a mistake then he doesn't go to school the following year. (FGD_EGDNR6-T449)

The participant highlighted the dangers of students not having the guidance to choose appropriate tracks, leading to delinquency.

The road for both, that is delinquent. When we lose one for school he goes out on the street; we just don't take him anymore; already in secondary school we have difficulty keeping them; it's better for them to be here in the morning, if not they're out stealing at the Adigeo. (FGD_EGDNR4-T457)

A teacher stressed that recommending a track leading to economic independence and autonomy would be more beneficial for the student's personal growth (FGD-EGDNR6-T455). They emphasized the importance of guiding students, especially Arab Muslim girls, toward educational tracks that offer both academic and vocational opportunities for socio-cultural growth and career prospects:

And so here I feel the burden of saying go to a school that allows you to redeem yourself, to learn. Even Arab Muslim girls like that go to a school that allows them to do, to learn. They are OK, if there is the possibility of university there, it is better if there is a socio-cultural redemption, but also the fact of having any kind of job, instead of staying at home looking after and raising children only that. So already the fact of saying choose a school that also allows you to learn a profession. (FG_D_EGDNR6-T449)

Another participant highlighted that considering the family situation and considering that this may be the only opportunity, (FG_D_EGDNR4-T476) Some teachers recommended vocational tracks, considering students' family situations and available opportunities. One teacher highlighted a positive example of a former student who found stable employment after attending a vocational school. The teacher used the case to illustrate how specialized vocational education can provide a supportive and structured pathway for students who may struggle in traditional academic settings, helping the students develop practical skills and secure meaningful work opportunities (FG_D_EGDNR6-T477).

- ***Considerations for School Dropout Recovery After Eighth Grade***

Teachers in the focus groups shared that few students resume their studies after dropping out, despite the presence of a nearby Provincial Adult Education Centre (CPIA) (FGD-EGDNR4-T481). Teachers reported efforts the school made to re-engage these students, such as organizing exam sessions, but many wait until they are 16 before considering a return to education: (FGD-EGDNR8-T485).

Few of these will come back, they come back in my opinion to do the evening schools. (F_D-EGDNR4-T479)

Some students who did not finish eighth grade are referred to the Adult Education Centre, but many still struggle to complete their studies:

We even sent kids who didn't finish the eighth grade to school drop-outs and had them pass by age directly here to the Provincial Centers for Adult Education¹⁰, which is here above the school that is the school for adults. Yet, they couldn't even finish the eighth grade. (FG_D-EGDNR4-T481)

- ***Teacher's Expectations***

The perspectives shared by teachers in the focus groups noted how their beliefs and expectations regarding a student's abilities impact their educational trajectory. Several teachers emphasized the weight that teacher's expectations carry in influencing students' academic progress (FG_D_EGDNR8-T347, FG_D_EGDNR4-T348, FG_D_EGDNR6-T352, (FG_D_EGDNR4-T353) Importantly a teacher shared acknowledged that teacher's expectations of students' abilities can significantly influence educational outcomes, while also recognizing that some students demonstrate resilience and determination to overcome challenges and exceed initial assessments (FG_D_EGDNR4-T361)

- ***Pupils' request for confrontation with the teacher***

Headteachers in the focus group observed that students often seek their advice, viewing teachers as trusted sources of guidance. Teachers are seen as figures to refer to for information and support, and students value their opinions highly (FG_D_EGDNR7-T367). One of the teachers said,

It is seen as a figure to refer to, because I see that the students take so much into consideration what we say anyway, we also witness the single word; and consequently, I expect that sooner or later someone will ask me or my path, why I am here. (FG_D_EGDNR7-T362)

Students inquire about various topics, including cultures, countries, educational systems, and their academic paths. (FGD_EGDNR7-T364). Teachers noted that these inquiries reflect the students' reliance on them as reference figures (FGD_EGDNR7-T362). One teacher described how students frequently ask about her educational journey, seeing these conversations as opportunities to reflect on life choices (INT-EGDNR1-T27).

Teachers also noted that students seek reassurance, especially when making significant academic decisions. Some high-achieving students express doubts about pursuing demanding paths and look for validation or encouragement to choose more ambitious tracks.

¹⁰ *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (CPIA)*

There are some very excellent pupils who tell me 'I'd like to go to the classic and the scientific lyceum, but I don't know if I can do it', because they are very frightened by the myth of 'you can't live like this anymore; you can't do it' (...). There you have to try to say no, look, everything can be done, you have to organize yourself; in short, it's not the end of the world. (INT-EGDNR1-T27)

In my opinion you can aim for a five-year vocational school or even a technical institute. If you put your mind to it, but in my opinion, you have all the characteristics to do it. So, the students also want to know from us teachers if we think they will make it. (FGD-EGDNR5-358)

Finally, a teacher provided an example illustrating how students often seek feedback and reassurance when concerned about how their performance in specific subjects might influence their academic track selection. The teacher shared the case of a student worried about a poor history grade seeking advice on choosing a school with minimal history coursework, highlighting how students' anxieties about grades can shape their decision-making (FG_D_EGDNR8-T354).

- ***Teacher-Led Orientation and Guidance***

Teachers described their role in evaluating students and providing guidance for the orientation council. One teacher shared how she assesses students' strengths, challenges, and preferences, striving to align recommendations with students' aspirations, though this is not always possible (INT-EGDNR1-T12).

For the class I coordinate obviously I was more careful, and I really filled out a little questionnaire for them, to understand we have to make a guidance council in which we have to give a judgement and write down where [the school]. What do we think are the winning things and where can the pupils aim and also a bit the council of the school that we propose. because at collegiate level and we did this questionnaire, or I filled in what they were, their desired ideas, but sometimes you can't. (INT-EGDNR1-T27)

This teacher uses a questionnaire to document students' preferences as a starting point:

[The guidance council questionnaire] is the one who decides; then I had made one [questionnaire] to write down their wishes because sometimes they do not match. (INT-EGDNR1-T29)

Another teacher described how she consults the guidebook, to explore high school options tailored to students' needs. By consulting updated resources, she aims to identify schools that align with

students' preferences and academic profiles, ensuring more personalized guidance (INT-EGDNR3-T3).

Another teacher reflected on the changes in the orientation process over time, highlighting how psycho-aptitude tests were once a standard method used to guide students toward high school choices. However, today, the process has become more dynamic, beginning as early as first grade and offering a broader range of opportunities for students to explore (INT-EGDNR2-T11).

Orientation Council

The orientation council, formalized under DPR 14 May 1966, No. 362, Article 2, Paragraph 2, provides non-binding recommendations on students' academic paths during their third year of lower secondary school. Based on academic performance and potential, these suggestions often lack meaningful dialogue with students and families, limiting the consideration of their aspirations, expectations, and resources.

The category comprised following themes: *the assignment of the track by the orientation council, acceptance of the orientation council's recommendation by the students, incongruence between interests and skills in school choice and consequences of mismatch between choice and guidance advice.*

- ***The assignment of the track by the orientation council***

Head teachers emphasized that the orientation council assigns each student an educational track deemed most appropriate by the class council (FGD-EGDNR7-T187).

A teacher explained that the orientation council assesses and highlights the student's overall level of competence, emphasizing a specific skill:

The level of competence is also highlighted, and a specific competence is also highlighted. If there is the level of competence I do not know, in foreign language, mathematics or technology (FGD-EGDNR5-T189)

The counselor discussed the process of assessing students to specific tracks, and criteria involved, highlighting the importance of precise recommendations. They explained that guidance is based on students' academic performance and suitability for particular subjects. Unlike in the past, where broader categories like lyceum or "technical school" were sufficient, recommendations now must specify exact programs

As far as possible, if that pupil there does well in those subjects and in our opinion is suitable, we write that (...) also because once you had to put a little high school; now you have to put the precise school. I can't put lyceums or a technical one, I have to write Technical Institute for Mechanics and Mechatronics or Technical Institute for Agriculture, so we try to... so then there are those good students who are four or five per class more or less and there we go along and then we are in line. (EGDR-T60)

- ***Acceptance of the Orientation Council's Recommendation by the Students***

Head teachers noted that orientation council recommendations are recorded in students' files and accessible by high schools, often used to evaluate whether students followed the advice in cases of academic failure (FGD-EGDNR7-T190).

While some high schools share success rates of students who adhered to these recommendations during open days (FGD-EGDNR5-T200), not all students follow the advice, sometimes enrolling in tracks misaligned with their abilities or interests (FGD-EGDNR7-T203). In some cases, students enroll in schools that are sometimes misaligned with their academic level or areas of interest (FGD-EGDNR7-T183). One headteacher observed that in her class, most students' choices aligned with the council's suggestions

In this third class of which I am the coordinator, I think that out of twenty 17 will adhere to both our [guidance council] and theirs. That is to say, I think we don't have positions that are far apart [teachers and students]. (INT-EGDNR1-T47).

However, examples were shared of students disregarding advice, including a talented student opting for a lower track:

Three years ago there was a very, very good Chinese boy who was very, very good and we told him to 'go to the scientific high school, go' at the beginning he said 'yes yes yes', at a certain point he said 'no I'm not going there at all I'm going to enrol, I remember where then he went to E. Technical Institution, in short a good school but he had backed out and he had a really good ability. (INT-EGDNR3-T72)

Teachers emphasized that this tendency is more prevalent in families who have been less engaged with the school over the years, often resulting in limited consideration of the guidance counselor's role in the decision-making process (FGD-EGDNR6-T205).

- ***Incongruence between Interests and Skills in School Choice***

The guidance counselor emphasized the difficulties that arise during the track recommendation process, particularly due to students' limited self-awareness and misalignment between their interests and abilities. She pointed out that young students often struggle to articulate their preferences, sometimes choosing a track based on friends or superficial interests, rather than their actual skills. The counselor noted that some students, particularly those who have faced significant challenges by the third grade, may not know what they truly enjoy. The counselor emphasized the importance of guiding students to more suitable options, such as a vocational training program or a technical track, rather than following unaligned preferences.

Maybe the child chooses a school on the basis of friends or on the basis of what he likes the least (...) the problem of many children who have arrived with great difficulty at the third grade is that you ask what you like and they don't know what they like. maybe they say I like languages, but maybe they have five in languages. but it's not enough that I like drawing to go there. In the artistic field you have a three-year vocational training centers (VTC)¹¹ or the artistic or the technical, what do I know, construction, environment, territory, the surveyor and so you have to send them if not to the VTC where else (EGDR/56)

The participant shared that despite providing informative materials and engaging in discussions with parents, there are still challenges and misalignments between parents' expectations and the reality of their children's track decisions. The counselor explained that while she provides all the material to parents, she often finds that they have their own ideas and can be quite stubborn (EGDR-T114).

- ***Consequences of Mismatch Between Choice and Guidance Advice***

The guidance counselor emphasized the difficulties that occur when there is a mismatch between students' choices and the professional guidance they receive. She noted that some students select schools based on family connections or anecdotes, such as a relative teaching there or a cousin who had a positive experience, rather than aligning their decision with the guidance council's recommendations. Although they are not obligated to follow this recommendation, this autonomy in decision-making can lead to mismatches between the chosen track and the student's abilities or interests (EGDR-T66).

¹¹ In Italian *Centri di Formazione Professionale* or *CFP*

The participant highlighted the challenges students face transitioning to high school, where they receive less support and face stricter grading standards. With limited familiarity and guidance, students often struggle to adapt, increasing the risk of failure.

In high school there is a different way of management. We check the homework, so I mark the notes in high school they don't check the homework, they have the test and the evaluations. We start from a four in high school they start from a two so failure is just around the corner because a two in math is hard to make up. (...)here the grades are much higher. However, we know them, so there is a lot of understanding, a lot of help; even if they have no certification, no report. They are obviously a bit of strangers there and they have to start all over again. (EGDR-T76)

School Choice for Pupils with a Migrant Background

This section examines factors shaping school choice for students with a migrant background, focusing on the following themes: *Barriers to school choice for Students with Migrant Backgrounds, Language Support and Skill Development for Immigrant Students, School Choice for Students with Linguistic Difficulties, Tendency to Choose Less Demanding Tracks in School Selection, Tendency to Choose Proximity in School Selection, Tendency of pupils with backgrounds to conceal cultural identity, Orientation support for Families Facing Language or System Challenges Through External Association Meetings.*

These themes focus on support these students in navigating their educational journey, ensuring their needs are met when making school choices and receiving tailored advice to overcome language-related barriers.

- ***Barriers to School Choice for Students with Migrant Backgrounds***

Students with migrant backgrounds face significant challenges in school choice, primarily due to language difficulties, which hinder academic success (FG-EGDNR6-T207). Teachers noted debates about assessing students' potential based on linguistic proficiency. This teacher highlighted a recurring debate among colleagues regarding the assessment of a student's potential based on their language proficiency in orientation decisions. Adopting a more optimistic perspective, she underscored her belief in the capacity of motivated students to overcome language-related challenges (INT-EGDNR1-T49). She sharing examples of cases where talented students were discouraged from pursuing demanding tracks due to language limitations:

Sometimes we teachers, too, go down with a tense leg, and it happened to me in another third year that colleagues wrote to me and said 'ah, this one wants to go to scientific school, he'll never make it, because of the books' and so on. On the other hand, I always go into a bit of a crisis on this one; because I believe that if a pupil has a strong motivation then the way is always open for him to face a school that is a bit more difficult unless it is really so obvious but in that shadow zone, no. (INT-EGDNRI-T29)

This head teacher also illustrated sharing a personal experience:

There is a very talented girl who arrived from Brazil this year and has already made incredible progress in her linguistic journey; a very intelligent girl (...) who attended (...) a military school for girls in Brazil. so she's very educated and very good and she has a lot of desire to do. And she would like to go to science but she has brains really. And the other day I was confronted with some colleagues and they said, 'are you crazy that you wrote the scientific? You don't put two reasonings in a row in written Italian, how do you think you will do?' I went into crisis (EGDNRI T49).

In line with language difficulties in immigrant students, the guidance counselor emphasized the critical role of language acquisition in school choices for students with language difficulties. She highlighted that for recently arrived foreign students, their ability to navigate the educational system heavily depends on how quickly they can learn Italian. She noted how the language skill influences the academic progress of immigrant students in Italy,

It depends a lot on how long it takes them to learn the Italian language. In the meantime, the main subject and study subjects, i.e. history, geography, science, if they don't have the Italian language in hand, unfortunately the choice of high school. (EGDR-T80)

However, she noted that the lack of Italian skills creates a significant gap, especially for foreign students, and can lead to challenges, such as recommending an artistic institute when they are not ready. She also emphasized the difficulties faced by recently arrived students, noting that extended struggles with learning Italian can severely hinder their ability to adapt to the curriculum.

Children who have only recently arrived and are sometimes even sent to an art school with a series of question marks, if it took them so long to learn Italian they will have difficulty. (EGDR-T82)

Immigrant families often lack familiarity with the school system, prioritizing proximity over suitability. Many students attend nearby schools due to linguistic fragility and limited knowledge of educational options:

Primarily, many students are linguistically fragile and have not followed an adequate educational path that would allow them to overcome these linguistic difficulties. They lack the tools to succeed in these schools, and understandably, they will also attend schools that are closer to them. (FG-EGDNR6-T207)

Another teacher highlighted the lack of awareness among immigrant families regarding the educational options available to their children, emphasizing that many are unfamiliar with the various school pathways and choices (FG-EGDNR4-T220). Additionally, it was highlighted that the immigrant parents' socio-cultural background can shape their aspirations for their children, often unintentionally limiting their potential. The teacher explained that due to these socio-cultural barriers, many immigrant students are encouraged to choose educational tracks that are below their true capabilities, as parents often believe these pathways will lead directly to employment opportunities (FG_D_EGDNR5-T310)

- ***Language Support and Skill Development for Immigrant Students***

Interview data revealed that newcomer immigrant students with no knowledge of the local language are often placed in lower classes, where they can receive dedicated language instruction. One teacher explained,

Perhaps a child from abroad who does not speak Italian is not placed in the class he should actually be in, but starts in a lower class, with less, in order to learn the language. (INT-EGDNR3-T62)

Headteachers shared examples illustrating how language acquisition impacts academic performance. One described a student who made rapid progress despite initially lacking Italian skills (INT-EGDNR3-T120).

One teacher described the challenges of supporting students in mastering complex subjects, particularly those who are still adapting to the language and curriculum. They highlighted that while students can grasp difficult concepts with guidance, this often requires extra time, tailored explanations, and collaborative efforts among educators and peers. For example, during a lesson on genetic engineering, additional support was needed to ensure comprehension, involving

multiple teachers and students working together to explain the material in a way that made it accessible (INT-EGDNR1-T55).

- ***School Choice for Students with Linguistic Difficulties***

The guidance counselor highlighted the importance of background information, such as files from previous schools and report cards, when determining school choices for newly arrived foreign students. She explained that students who arrive close to orientation may struggle, as they often lack sufficient time to learn Italian and might risk repeating a grade. However, those who arrive earlier in the year are better positioned for orientation and can be directed toward professional or technical schools.

The tools in the meantime are the previous material that comes from them, from their previous schools. Children who arrived the day before orientation are difficult to find, also because often (...) sometimes, unfortunately, they risk repeating the third year because they need an extra year to learn the Italian language. Children who have arrived at least at the beginning of the year in a four-month period more or less, do it in time, (...) you make the orientation council in June and in that year you try to follow them and to [help them] understand the language of mathematics and the other languages, (...) to understand whether to direct them towards a professional or a technical school. You direct them towards an Italian school for the summer. (EGDR-T84)

The counselor's emphasis on background information aligns with challenges noted in the Ministero dell'Istruzione report (2021), which underscores the difficulties foreign students face in grade placement, integration, and recognition of prior knowledge.

- ***Tendency to Choose Less Demanding Tracks in School Selection***

The interviews revealed a pattern among students with an immigrant background of selecting less demanding academic tracks, even when capable of pursuing more ambitious paths. One teacher noted:

A positive performance definitely influences the choice. (...) Often, the choice of foreign pupils is lower than what we recommend. (...) Maybe 3 or 4 very good foreign pupils actually chose to go to a high school. Many others preferred to choose schools that were less demanding or that gave a diploma at the end of the five-year period rather than choosing a high school instead. Those who went to a high school did excellently. (INT-EGDNR2-T78)

Head teachers linked this trend to socio-familial challenges, including limited parental involvement and the hardships migrant families face (INT-EGDNR2-T7). She attributed this preference to the socio-familial hardships these students often face, which limit both their

engagement at school and their ambition to pursue further education. Even academically capable students, she observed, tend to prioritize Vocational Training Centers (CFPs) over university-oriented tracks.

The overwhelming majority [of foreign pupils] go to Vocational Training Centers (CFP)s; they are vocational training councils; Because they come from a socio-family hardship, which has led to limited engagement at the school level, but even those who might be good are always looking for the shortest school the school that (...) then doesn't force you to enrich yourself further in university. (INT- EGDNR2-T11)

This teacher noted cases of strong parental support, such as a Nigerian family with two daughters excelling at a lyceum, were rare:

For example, (...) two very excellent sisters, (...) who went to lyceum, but they already had an older sister who was studying medicine and so let's say they were in a family where, for example, the parents came to the interviews and these were Nigerian girls (...) very good but (...) I could count them on one hand, very few. (INT-EGDNR2-T78)

Another head teacher observed that the tendency to avoid demanding tracks is common among both migrant and native students, driven by fear of struggle and a preference for comfort (INT-EGDNR3-T141). She explained

I have not seen so many differences between the native and the foreign parent. One thing I have noticed in the pupils (...) something that is really generalized is that (...) there has been a tendency for a while now to pull back a bit, because they are perhaps afraid of struggling. There are very few who choose a school, let's say a high school, but even good kids. (...) I think they have a kind of fear. It is, however, in all children (...) I'm talking about adolescents and teenagers in general, that there is this sort of fear, they don't want to work too hard, it's a tendency that is perhaps typical of today's children. (INT- EGDNR3- T72 &T74)

This reluctance, she added, was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the extended period of remote learning, which encouraged a more sedentary and risk-averse mindset (INT-EGDNR3-T72, T132).

- ***Tendency to Choose Proximity in School Selection***

Focus group discussions with teachers revealed that distance from the high school is a key factor in track choice, particularly for students from immigrant families. Limited access to driving and

reliance on public transportation often lead families to prioritize nearby schools. One teacher explained:

[Geographical proximity] an important criterion; I can understand they are small; they are eighth graders, for those who drive little; so, even moving in public transportation I can understand the reason; I certainly do not justify it. (FG-EGDNR6-T211)

One teacher noted that parents frequently enroll children in nearby schools as a matter of primary criterion for school choice. Another headteacher highlighted this issue, observing that families, especially those with language barriers, often choose the closest school:

The parents enroll them there. Then we have a public school in St Giuseppe that also offers an administrative vocational path and some go there too. The priority for these is proximity. (FG-EGDNR6-T209)

Families with language difficulties also choose the school on the basis of proximity. In Borgo we have a scientific high school and a technical linguistic institute Marketing, Einaudi. (FGD-EGDNR6-T205)

This focus on proximity restricts options, particularly in neighborhoods with limited educational tracks.

In sum the head teachers highlighted that for families with language difficulties, proximity-based decisions often further constrain educational opportunities.

- ***Tendency of pupils with backgrounds to conceal cultural identity***

Interviews revealed that students with immigrant backgrounds often struggle to openly embrace their cultural identity, which can complicate decision-making and support in their educational journey. Teachers observed:

Sometimes they hide, sometimes the fact that they belong to a different culture, that they have different roots, they don't always accept it in the first place. And so, it is then difficult to help them in their choices. (INT-EGDNR2-T39)

They [students with backgrounds] are often ashamed of it, (...) it almost bothers them that one points out that they are foreigners because they feel Italian. (INT-EGDNR2-T37)

Specific incidents illustrated the complexity of identity expression. One teacher described a Muslim student who removed her veil near school, balancing cultural expectations at home with peer perceptions:

I think the ambiguity of identity and sometimes, for example, I give her as an example (...) this year at recess there was a girl of mine who was teasing another girl and said 'look, I'll tell your mum', (...) I said 'what? I said 'what?' and at first she didn't want to tell me, then this girl's family would like her to wear the veil and when she leaves home and arrives near the school she takes it off and then there was this other girl, she's Muslim, who told her that she doesn't have the veil, who told her 'ah but how can you wear it at home and not here?' (INT-EGDNR2-T39)
'(...) In the other school where I was, Ramadan is hot, little boy who goes to drink because he can't take it anymore, immediately the other one comes and says ah look at that...(INT-EGDNR2-T39)

In the second example, the teacher described how some students faced internal and external conflicts related to cultural practices, such as adhering to Ramadan fasting rules under challenging circumstances.

The interviews also highlighted how students reflect on the differences between their previous environments and their current school setting, often expressing appreciation or culture shock (INT-EGDNR1-T6). She explained:

She [the Moroccan student] was from a very small village in the interior (...) the other day we were watching a film (...) the film 'Dead Poets Society' and there is a scene where the boy is punished by the headmaster corporally; and she said, while everyone was laughing: no, but in Morocco it still happens like that. And so she told a bit about this thing at her school. (INT-EGDNR1-T8)

These narratives highlight the dual challenges of cultural adaptation and acceptance for students with immigrant backgrounds, offering insights into their complex educational experiences.

- ***Orientation support for Families Facing Language or System Challenges Through External Association Meetings***

Head teachers in the focus group emphasized the significance of an annual informational meeting organized by the Rete Tante Tinte Network, which has been operating in Verona since 1994. This network, consisting of around 100 schools and local organizations and non-profits, promoting intercultural education and supporting the integration of immigrant students in Italian schools. Its

efforts focus on teacher training, fostering collaboration with families, and encouraging intercultural awareness (Rete Tante Tinte, 2024).

As noted by teachers, during the track selection period each winter, the network plays a key role by organizing meetings specifically for immigrant families. These meetings are supported by linguistic mediators help address language barriers and ensure families have access to important information:

The Tante Tinte Network our school organises an information meeting every year for foreign language families, with mediators of the main languages present in the school. So, it's not that they can't know, because there are possibilities. (FGD-EGDNR7-T221)

A teacher highlighted that these meetings provide families with a clearer understanding Italian education system, especially regarding upper secondary schools:

[Orientation meeting] Parents(FGD-EGDNR7-T223)- [During the meetings organized for foreign families by the Tante Tinte Network] They explain to the families how schools work in Italy, they know above all the high schools and that they are present in the territory, the typology, the addresses, the discourse of the maturity so in a foreign language. (FGD-EGDNR7-T225)

In addition, the guidance counselor highlighted that when families face language barriers or lack knowledge about the education system, teachers work collaboratively to address these challenges. In such cases, subject teachers or support staff may reach out to the counselor to ensure the families receive appropriate guidance and support:

Where indeed in the class you know that there are some parents who are really in difficulty who don't understand Italian; even the literature teacher, the support teacher contacts me and we try to address them and help them.(EGDR-T46)

The counselor noted that language mediators play a crucial role in facilitating communication and ensuring better understanding for parents with language difficulties (EGDR-T50).

Orientation Activities

This category encompasses various themes related to guidance and support for students transitioning to high school. These themes are critical in understanding how educational institutions facilitate the integration of students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, into the school community and curriculum. This category covered following themes *orientation fair, open-day and mini jobs, teacher strategies for supporting informative orientation activities, distribution and explanation of the high school guidance booklet, orientation practice before third grade, introductions of external figures during the pre-covid period*. In the next pages these these will be summarized and described.

- ***Orientation fair***

As the guidebook is provided by the city of Verona the guidance counselor mentioned another resource offered by the territory, which is the Orientation fair, offered every year in November. The event, typically held annually, was missed during the COVID-19 pandemic (INT-EGDNR3-T38 & INT-EGDNR1-T16).

A head teacher in the focus group emphasized the importance of orientation fairs in helping students make informed decisions about their future educational paths. A teacher noted that the orientation fair offers students a valuable opportunity to gather information, ask questions, and explore their available options. During the event, students from all third-year classes were able to collect brochures, engage in direct conversations, and gain a clearer understanding of the various initiatives, helping them form an initial idea of their future educational choices (FGD- EGDNR8-T146).

Also individual interviews highlighted how the orientation fair serves as a valuable platform for students to explore academic tracks, engage with peers and teachers, and gain clarity about their options (INT-EGDNR1-T19). One head teacher observed that the fair encouraged active participation and fostered motivation:

Then it was very important to go with them to the orientation fair. I've always been a bit wary of it, I thought it was a bit American to do it during these days with all the stands (...) but I must say that I was very surprised, I saw that it is really important for the young people. (...) There are a lot of young people at home who have absolutely no chance to talk to each other, to talk, to ask. And instead, there in the stands [at the orientation fair] both with the students who were there and with the teachers, they asked very targeted questions about the curriculum. (...) [At the orientation

fair] One girl who would have really made a mess by choosing a certain school, understood and identified what the problem was by reading the curriculum and listening to her high school colleague (...). (INT-EGDNR1-T12)

This specific example illustrated how the fair helped a student reconsider her choice of academic track. Initially inclined towards a technical course, the student was advised at the fair about a more suitable artistic high school curriculum, which aligned better with her interests.

The interviewee highlighted that the fair also facilitated hands-on experiences in vocational training areas, allowing students to engage in face-to-face interactions, which offered a more personalized experience than online resources alone, enabling students to explore potential academic and career paths in a tangible and interactive way (INT-EGDNR1-T21). This interviewee underscored the facilitating organization of orientation fair based on categories:

The presence of all the high schools in Verona at the orientation fair, organized into categories based on their type (INT-EGDNR1-T23).

However, the guidance counselor highlighted the limitations of open days as an informational tool compared to direct interactions with schools. She explained that high schools often promote themselves heavily during these events, but students may not fully realize the differences between public and fee-paying partner schools. While some of these schools offer various activities and opportunities, the counselor pointed out that the economic situation of many students makes it unlikely for them to pursue enrollment in fee-paying schools, even if they are presented as partner institutions.

The open day has its limitations compared to open days [being] appointments with schools themselves [...] - high schools try to get a lot of publicity and we also allow the partner schools. They [the students] sometimes don't even realize that they are talking to a partner school, that is, a public school, which offers them activities, trips, outings, various things, and they are fee-paying schools, and most of the students of this type of school here, however, have an economic situation that is not exactly... in short, there are few who then enroll in partner or semi-partner schools.(EGDR-T32)

This guidance counselor's perspective contrasts with the headteacher's observation which highlighted the mixed organization of stands by type and category at the fair, facilitating the experience.

- ***Open-day and mini jobs***

Interviews provided insights into participation in open days and "mini jobs." Teachers noted that high schools organized structured activities during school hours, offering students a realistic view of daily school life and curriculum. These activities allowed students to experience the school environment firsthand, a crucial aspect emphasized by teachers (INT-EGDNR3-T32 & T34; *INT-EGDNR2-T43*).

One teacher emphasized the critical importance of such opportunities in order to experience a school environment firsthand. A teacher highlighted that students have the autonomy to book their visits and participate in open days at various schools independently (INT-EGDNR3-T32 & INT-EGDNR3-T42). However, teachers noted that participation is not universal. Some students, already clear about their chosen academic track, may skip these events, feeling they are unnecessary (*INT-EGDNR3-T44*). The participant's observations highlighted how students' decisiveness significantly influences their engagement in orientation activities.

(...) Not everyone does [Open-day]. Some people choose that school because they already know they want to go that particular route; therefore, they don't even need to go and see. (INT-EGDNR3-T44)

The teacher also noted that some students, though independent in making decisions, rarely attend open days without family support. (*INT-EGDNR3-T46*). She illustrated the crucial role of parental support in facilitating participation in orientation activities organized by high schools with her own experience,

I'll give you an example: last year I had my son who did eighth grade. We made him do open days at the schools (...) where he hypothetically wanted to enrol (...) we were also willing to take him. But if neither I nor my husband were interested, you can see that he wouldn't even go alone. (INT-EGDNR3-T46)

The counselor emphasized the role of higher secondary schools in guidance, noting that open-day events starting in October or November allow students to visit and compare different schools. (EGDR-T30). She highlighted that the schools provide links in order to reserve the participation, and that the parents' responsibility is to register their children as soon as possible (*EGDR-T38*).

This participant highlighted the importance of support for the participation in open-days. The participant stressed the importance of early planning for open days, noting that while some events

are held as late as January or February, many students have already registered by then. She observed that parents often overlook this timing, hindering well-informed decisions.

The topic of open days is reiterated so many times. But I found myself in talks with parents (...) where they said that they knew what needed to be done but perhaps did not perceive the urgency of it and so they told me they wanted to find out how to register for the open day. (EGDR-T46)

The guidance counselor underscored these visits and Mini job participations as two main activities designed to support the most undecided students in making informed choices. The counselor noted that visits to traditional high schools tended to be less impactful.

She explained that before the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the annual school exhibition and open days, there were limited opportunities for school visits. For students who were more undecided about their educational path, a few schools offered one-day visits during school hours. These visits allowed students to explore the school environment, participate in workshops, and interact with others, providing them with a closer look at potential options (EGDR-T36).

The limitations of orientation activities during the COVID-19 pandemic were also discussed with the head teachers. They noted that open days were held online, which teachers found less effective than in-person events. Before the pandemic, schools would organize visits for entire student groups, offering a more interactive experience (INT-EGDNR3-T128).

- ***Teacher Strategies for Supporting informative orientation activities***

A head teacher discussed various strategies to assist students in making informed educational decisions, including providing key information, highlighting important dates, and encouraging parental involvement:

I'll tell him, look at the site, look at the date, I'll give it to him, I'll just take it and write it down (FG-EGDNR4-T237)
Look the meeting is on this day, you can tell mum to come with you. Then you call him did you go? 'No, you couldn't', you couldn't, it's a priority but because I put it as a priority for them; here however you can see behind it that there is still so much...(FG-EGDNR4-T239)

I have girls that I see are having difficulties, I have to take them to see the schools. (FG-EGDNR4-T235)

The counselor's observations echoed the challenges in supporting immigrant families with school visits and open days. While students are informed, parents often need extra assistance due to

language barriers, unfamiliarity with the system, or lack of urgency. The counselor noted that some parents require reminders and help with online registration, as they may not fully understand the process (EGDR-T46). Additionally, the counselor highlighted the recurring need to follow up with families on basic tasks, such as signing documents or responding to notices, indicating a broader challenge of engagement and understanding.

The counselor also shared experiences of repeated meetings with parents who had different aspirations for their child's academic track, sometimes delaying decisions until the last moment.

I am talking about a boy in my third grade who is a Sri Lankan boy. The parents work and they did online interviews (...) That means they have a device, and I sent them the link of the school in S.Z neighborhood, I mean, a vocational institution. Then they asked me, at the end of three meetings because in reality what they wanted for their son was not what I had proposed and maybe they had already decided, maybe they realized at the last moment. (EGDR-T46)

Teachers also shared that they encouraged students to engage in activities like open days and "mini-jobs" to gain firsthand insights into schools. One teacher stressed the importance of going beyond the idealized image presented during open days:

I often tell families 'send your children, not just to the open day, where of course the headmasters sell their school; so, everything is nice and everything works, everything is great'. But 'sit in desks among kids your age or who are a little more than a year older than you and ask Do they give you a lot of homework and what are the teachers like? Do all the computers work?' (...) that is, to concretely experience what will then be their choice and this many have done, many are doing and I hope they will do even more. (INT-EGDNR2-T43)

Additionally, teachers recommended that students carefully review the study plans of prospective schools to ensure alignment with their strengths and interests. One teacher noted the importance of considering the overall balance of subjects, not just focusing on a favorite subject:

So I say, when you have a school in mind and you want to choose a particular school, but the first thing to do is to look at the number of hours and see but how many hours in that school do I do Italian, math and then my favorite subject? So an IT expert is not doing IT 36 hours a week. (...) So be careful, because then maybe you go to a school where, in order to do that extra hour of computer science, you get 6 extra hours of math where maybe you don't do so well or so on. (INT-EGDNR2-T64)

- ***Distribution and Explanation of the High School Guidance Booklet***

In the third grade, students are offered more comprehensive informational activities and resources. Each year, a guidebook detailing all the high schools in Verona is distributed by a public association in the city. This guidebook serves as a key resource, supplemented by information provided directly by the guidance counsellor. While each student receives their own copy of the guidebook, it is also available online. However, it is important to note that the guidebook is written exclusively in Italian.

It is a guide to all high schools in Verona and its province. They [the students] on this guide can have information on how many years the school lasts, all the addresses, if there are addresses. I mean, let's say a technician, there is VTC and any additional information mail, amount of theory and practice of that school there. Admission criteria in case of redundancy. In short, divided by sector, so, there is the humanities, tourism, science, natural, aesthetic, agronomist and so on (EGDR-T40)

- ***Orientation practice before third grade***

The teachers highlighted that orientation activities begin as early as the second grade of middle school (FGD- EGDNR8-T148). These early activities encompass many components of the third-grade orientation program, with the exception of participation in the orientation fair (FGD- EGDNR8-T150 & FGD- EGDNR8-T152).

For middle schoolers from second grade, orientation program includes an informative meeting held at the end of May. Following this, teachers carry out interventions in classrooms between October and November to support students in their decision-making process.

[Second grade orientation] at the end of May, an informative meeting basically then the teacher does the actions, but does them immediately, does interventions in the classes in October to November. (FGD- EGDNR4-T154)

In line with head teacher's observations, the guidance counselor noted that in Italy, students are introduced to the track selection process starting in the second grade of lower secondary school, typically through a one-hour session. As the interviewed guidance counsellor explained, during this brief session, students are made aware of the orientation procedure that will take place in the third year. Additionally, they are provided with information and websites for further details and resources. As a guidance counselor explained, this session serves to familiarize students with the orientation procedure that will take place in the third year:

In the second year, I do a small meeting, just one hour. I tell the students a bit about what we will do the following year, show them the websites, help them register, and give them some information. (EGDR-T111)

Guidance counselor noted that during this stage, the focus is on sparking genuine interest in students and providing them with preliminary guidance, due to students lack readiness,

You need to really reach them to get them genuinely interested. (EGDR-T111)

The counselor highlighted that parental involvement typically begins in the second year of lower secondary school. At this stage, parents often seek guidance on their children's future educational paths, with some particularly anxious parents even initiating these discussions during the first year. Both students and parents are gradually introduced to orientation activities, ensuring they are better prepared for the decision-making process ahead.

- ***Introductions of external figures during the pre-covid period***

Head teachers explained that before the COVID-19 pandemic, informative meetings were organized for second-grade students, featuring external professionals who presented their jobs and discussed career opportunities (FGD- EGDNR8-T157 & FGD- EGDNR8-T161).

In the pre-covid era there were even specialized professional figures, in second grade.(FGD- EGDNR8-T155)

However, the pandemic made it difficult to organize such events, and currently, and external experts no longer participate.

One teacher shared an example of a past meeting with a surveyor, where the professional illustrated specific programs used in their field and allowed students to engage with them directly.

For example, a meeting with surveyors who illustrated some specific programmes for their work and had the students use them (FGD- EGDNR8-T163)

Re-orientation

Re-orientation generally refers to guiding or redirecting students, particularly those who face challenges in the educational system, to help them integrate better and make appropriate choices (Marostica, 2003).

This category emerged exclusively from the data from the interview with the guidance counselor. The category explores the process of re-orientation, focusing on the reassessment and adjustment of students' educational paths. The themes comprised *re-orientation and possible modifications of the choice and re-orientation and consequences*. These themes examine how students may revisit their initial school choices, the factors prompting such changes, and the potential outcomes or consequences of these adjustments in their academic trajectories.

- ***Re-orientation and Possible Modifications of the Choice***

The guidance counselor identified two key moments for re-orientation: at the end of third grade and after the first year of secondary school. She explained that in rare cases, recommendations can be revised in June if a student's performance or commitment improves, better aligning their track with their abilities and aspirations (EGDR-T74).

While students can choose their preferred school and track, high schools may take into account the recommended track suggested by the guidance council. The counselor noted that pupils are aware they may be subject to re-orientation if they are not adequately suited for their chosen track.

They [the pupils] can register, it means clicking on a school. So, the school says no. That is, they do the enrolment in complete autonomy. In January where they express three preferences, then to the school they bring the guidance council (...). So the school knows if the choice matches. If I enroll in a technician and a VTC is recommended. The school knows when it will form that class, it knows in the meantime the level of competences, the grade they came out with and it knows a bit what they were advised. (EGDR-T64)

The participant highlighted that all high schools conduct re-orientation. After entrance tests and initial evaluations, students may be invited within the first semester or mid-year to reconsider their track if they face challenges in specific subjects.

They do [the re-orientation] after the students have entered they have been known obviously by the teachers they have done entrance tests and they have seen the results; in my opinion the first two three months and also in the middle of the year, they at a certain point of some invite them to think about changing address and because then obviously in the first four months they already see the subjects in which they can have the debt.(EGDR-T66)

- ***Re-orientation and Consequences***

The participant emphasized the importance of parents understanding the emotional and psychological challenges students may face when dealing with failure and changing their track. She shared her experiences with former students to illustrate the risk of school dropout. She recounted encounters with her former students who revealed they had changed tracks during high schools or had left school altogether. Some, she noted, struggle and eventually drop out after facing repeated challenges in their educational journey (EGDR-T66). The participant observed that some students are able to complete their education only with the assistance of support programs designed for those with learning disorders, special educational needs, or personalized learning plans.

Sometimes those in high school succeed, sometimes they, although with great difficulty, manage to get by because even in high school there are personalized programmes, programmes for DLS, special educational needs. (EGDR-T66)

Digital Tools and Online Guidance Management

This category emerged only from the interview with the guidance counselor and explores the use of digital tools and online platforms in supporting guidance activities. The themes covered by this category are as follows: *managing classroom and online guidance and access to online materials*. These themes focus on how guidance counselors integrate digital resources in the guidance process, facilitating classroom management and providing students with access to essential online materials for informed decision-making.

- ***Managing Classroom and Online Guidance***

Building on the class-based activities, the guidance counselor noted that the students in the school involved in this study have access to Google classroom. The participant explained how she shares links and digital material with the students through this online channel. She highlighted the use of this digital space for sharing the material and notices.

I say and publish three things: I recommend going to open days. Visit various sites such as Plan Your Future Network, the site promoted by Edu-Life and offering information and interviews. (EGDR-T46)

- ***Access to Online Materials***

Regarding the digital devices for accessing this digital material, she noted,

They all basically have a device; I mean a mobile phone. (EGDR-T46)

Mutual communication between home and school offers benefits to both parents and teachers, supporting them in achieving their respective goals (Henniger, 1981). However, the counselor noted a gap in the communication of information, announcements, or notices shared via Google Classroom from students to parents.

Of course, Classroom is open to the children. And in parallel, let's say the important notices I put on the electronic register. (EGDR-T46)

Orientation Perspectives

The present section explores the factors influencing students' educational decisions and experiences. The category covered following themes: *lack of motivation in pupils, students' challenges and decisions in school choice, difficulties of choice due to age and many choices, difficulties of choice due to age and many choices influence of family expectations on school choice, parents' ways and criteria for school choice, perspectives of student and parental choice, difficulty in choosing due to a limited perspective on future professions, better performance of girls compared to boys, desire for redemption through school in pupils with a foreign background, considerations of different ethnicities and approaches to school choice, socioeconomic influences on school choice, excessive focus on profession and earnings over culture*

These themes are essential for understanding the complex interplay of personal, social, and economic influences that guide students' paths in education.

- ***Lack of motivation in pupils***

Headteachers in the focus group observed a widespread lack of motivation among students to set meaningful goals. One teacher shared her personal journey to emphasize the importance of motivation:

Today I see young people who don't have a dream for their future, they are very resigned to this, they don't know that a school course could lead them to a university course and many of them probably don't even think about going to university. I, on the other hand, had clear ideas, I thought

I'm going to do this now, then university, then I'm going to travel the world (...)(FG_D_EGDNR8-T260)

According to this data, this lack of motivation often leads students to choose schools based solely on proximity, a decision that can lower their self-esteem.

[The dream] was the engine that kept me going and made me commit myself, an initial resignation and this leads them to choose the closest school and they don't want to sacrifice themselves; 'I'm not going to do anything with my life anyway' this is already something that strongly influences them, not having self-esteem and many of them don't have it with a few exceptions (...) I know some young people, probably many foreigners; desire and strength...(FG_D_EGDNR8-T263)

Teachers emphasized that improving language skills can help increase students' motivation and willpower for planning their futures (FG_D_EGDNR8-T273). Additionally, they observed that gaining employment can also act as a motivational factor. However, a significant lack of motivation persists: (FG_D_EGDNR6-T282).

[They don't have a goal] And so do many Italians. (FG_D_EGDNR6-T284)
Because it's the same [Italians and foreigners] but it's also in choosing things, in short, it's the same. (FG_D_EGDNR6-T301)

Furthermore, the teachers highlighted the influence of family dynamics, as disengaged or uninvolved parents can contribute to their children's lack of motivation.

Students' challenges and decisions in school choice

The head teachers interviewed shared insights into the challenges and uncertainties students face when selecting an educational track.

A teacher observed that while only a few students are completely uncertain about their track choice, most have some direction or doubt between options:

Those who have absolutely no idea., there are very few of them. Some may have the doubt to do this or to do that but to say I don't know, they are few, in my opinion. (INT-EGDNR3-T8)

This morning one of the girls, we have the (...) orientation council tomorrow (...) and she said 'I don't know what to do I don't know where to enroll'. We told her 'look you're going to have to actually write soon so you have to think of something, at least an interest'. 'I don't know'. So, in a total vacuum. (INT- EGDNR3-T6)

However, this recent example was shared of a student who had no clear preference even the day before the orientation council meeting:

- ***Difficulties of Choice Due to Age and Many Choices***

One significant challenge students face in selecting their educational track is their young age, which often limits their ability to envision the future and navigate the uncertainties it holds. The interviews revealed that students may struggle with a fear of the "factual unknown"—a lack of understanding about what lies ahead in life and education. (INT-EGDNR1-T33).

A head teacher reflected on the untapped potential of third-grade students, noting that some children may not yet have had the opportunity to express or develop their full abilities. She described this stage as having an "embryonic margin" of potential waiting to be realized. The teacher also acknowledged how educators can sometimes be too quick or rigid in their judgments, which may limit opportunities for students to grow and prove themselves:

In the eighth grade there are children who may not have been able to express themselves as they are, as they can become. There is always an embryonic margin that wants to develop. (INT-EGDNR1-T29) (...) And sometimes we are a bit dry in our judgements (...) that is, we don't give the possibility. When it's like that I'm a bit sorry because I would like to at least say 'you might have difficulties, but you might not be able to do it'. So that's why I did this questionnaire to see if things were a bit in line. (INT-EGDNR1-T29)

The interviews revealed differing opinions among head teachers regarding middle school students' self-awareness and readiness for decision-making during this pivotal period. Middle school was described as a transformative period where students transition from childhood to pre-adolescence, often leading to confusion and self-doubt, making it difficult for students to understand themselves or their capabilities:

Middle school just the most complicated period let's say because they come in that they are children, the children come out that they are already a bit pre-adolescent. There's such a change in themselves that they don't know

themselves well yet so it's hard to even think about understanding what they are. So the fears are fears in their heads I think it's about not being aware either of their own energy or of what's outside. (INT-EGDBR1-T33)

However, another headteacher expressed confidence in students' self-awareness and ability to make informed decisions, despite the complexity of the current educational system and its many options:

I believe that they are able to understand who they are and what they want from their lives. Most of them are able to do that. Of course, nowadays choosing a school is very difficult because, it's not just a matter of choosing between a technical institute and a vocational institute, or a high school or a vocational training center within that then I have to choose which field to go into. (INT-EGDNR2-T43)

- ***Influence of Family Expectations on School Choice***

The guidance counselor highlighted the significant role of family expectations in students' educational paths. The participant emphasized that in Italian families these expectations are often shaped by the parents' or older siblings' educational backgrounds and professions, which can influence students' decisions positively or negatively (EGDR-T56). The participant also recounted an example of a student who followed her parents' preferred track despite her own aspirations:

Example of the Italian pupil who was pushed towards the classical lyceum while she preferred the scientific lyceum.(EGDR-T56)

The guidance counselor observed that aspirations and expectations in immigrant families often differ from those in Italian families. Immigrant parents frequently aspire for their children to achieve a better economic status than they themselves have attained or to fulfill ambitions they were unable to realize:

In foreign families we have (...)parents who basically would like their children to emancipate themselves from what they have not done.(EGDR-T56)

However, the participant noted that these expectations sometimes misalign with the children's skills and abilities. She shared an example of an immigrant mother whose aspirations conflicted with her son's challenges:

A mother of a boy who was born in Italy, she is a foreigner, and her son would like to be a technician his son is SLD. In mathematics he has great difficulty and the mother told me I still resent my father because he wanted me to do one school, I wanted to do another because of him, I had to do another school. (EGDR-T56)

- ***Parents' Ways and Criteria for School Choice***

The guidance counselor highlighted that some parents prioritize specific criteria when deciding on their child's educational track, which can limit the range of options. For instance, some parents prefer a five-year track over a three-year one, believing it provides better opportunities for language improvement, professional preparation, and future prospects. However, these preferences can overlook important factors such as the student's skills, language proficiency, or potential learning difficulties. This requires careful guidance to ensure that the chosen school suits the student's needs, including for those with special educational needs like SDL:

Parents realize that after three years work isn't waiting for them there and so they want me to do five years and push them to so they also have to direct them sometimes towards those five-year schools but with an eye towards, foreigners SDL other challenges (EGDR-T56)

The guidance counselor highlighted that parental approaches vary significantly. While some parents fully rely on guidance advice or their child's preferences, about half are able to follow the recommendations provided. However, a notable group, both Italian and foreign, tends to disregard the counselor's advice, reflecting diverse attitudes toward the guidance process.

Some [parents], on the other hand, are completely in the dark and rely on the advice you give them or what their child says. (EGDR-T56)

There is always a group that does not follow the guidance advice but both Italians and foreigners probably do in equal measure. (EGDR-T60)

- ***Perspectives of student and parental choice***

The guidance counselor observed that many students tend to choose schools with a strong emphasis on math and science, despite struggling in these subjects and relying on support

programs. For instance, some students opt for tracks like computer science due to personal interests or misconceptions:

They choose schools that are focused on maths and science, where for three years they have not studied maths, they do not do well, they do not do their homework. (...) where they have always had to do customised courses, help, in short compensation with forms and various things. (...). Maybe you think you want to be a computer scientist because you like being there at the computer (...) In short, despite the fact that we tell them over and over again that maths is studied there and there is no computer (...).- What we do is talk to the kids, talk to the parents. Put them down a bit. (...) (EGDR-T60)

Technical institutions are increasingly popular, especially among boys, in fields like computer science, mechanics, mechatronics, electricity, and marketing. Few students show interest in lycées, and even those with significant challenges often pursue technical tracks, which can be seen as less prestigious. The counselor emphasized the importance of discussing these decisions with both students and their parents to ensure a better understanding of the options.

This boom on technical especially for boys, for boys. And they all want to head for computer science and mechanics, mechatronics and electricity. just so many this year I also see a lot of administration finance and marketing in my third year, high school science one. So many [want to head towards] technical, even kids with big difficulties and I had to talk to them, I had to talk to their parents. Unfortunately for them it sounds a bit debasing. (EGDR-T60)

The counselor recounted an instance where an immigrant mother insisted on helping her child with homework to enable them to attend her preferred school, overlooking the child's actual academic capacity:

What we do is talk to the students, talk to the parents, and lay things out for them. I had an interview a meeting with a foreign mother. She says 'No, but I'll get her help, I'll give her help with her homework. If he doesn't like it I'll change schools for him'. At some point you have to decide. (EGDR-T62)

- ***Difficulty in choosing due to a limited perspective on future professions***

Headteachers observed that students often struggle to understand their aspirations for future professions.

we often ask 'but what would you like to do?' in the meantime it is a difficult question. (FGD- EGDNR5-T324)

Teachers also emphasized that students' young age exacerbates this difficulty, especially when parental support is lacking. Reflecting on her own experience, a participant shared:

I see myself a bit in the pupils, because I remember well my choice in the eighth grade. I had a very busy family, so my parents were not behind me. So yes, they made me a little responsible for my future choice; (...)so I was always left a little autonomous and 12 years old (...) 12 years old was a little young for the future, but I had dreams; (...)over the years; as I grew up they changed.(FGD_EGDNR8-T260)

The focus group noted that students' challenges also stem from their limited ability to envision future careers, as many jobs they may pursue do not yet exist (FGD- EGDNR5-T324 & FGD-EGDNR5-T319).

Because they have experience of the unlimited world. But it's also true that it's a misleading question I think that most of the jobs that these guys will find themselves doing don't exist at the moment. So it's such a difficult question the jobs that my parents liked are different from the jobs that my brothers and I do(FGD- EGDNR5-T326)

- ***Better performance of girls compared to boys***

The data from the interviews noted a consistent trend of girls outperforming boys academically, observable among both Italian and immigrant students. This disparity was often attributed to developmental and maturity differences, with girls demonstrating greater determination and clarity in their goals:

In my opinion (...) [the young girls]; they are more determined; because better, more determined maybe more mature. Because little girls are a bit more mature than boys. Not for everyone is like that, just because there are also very mature boys. But the young girls, in my opinion, are the more convinced, more determined about what they want to do. (...) [Greater performance of females than males is the same between Italians and foreigners] unfortunately it is like that in some cases. (INT-EGDNR3-T99)

One headteacher highlighted the exceptional academic performance of girls from the Arab world, attributing their success to strong motivation and resilience. She explained that these students often aspire to redefine traditional roles and exceed societal expectations (INT-EGDNR1-T83).

I don't know if it's prejudice, but maybe more than prejudice I think it's desire and (...) they are very intelligent girls [girls, especially from the Arab world]. It's as if they are finally, like, relishing the possibility of doing things of enthusiasm rather than social revenge. I also think it's something they want to break free from; I think because they see that maybe talking about the reality of being mothers, like they want to emerge from a context and create something different for them. I notice that a little bit. (INT-EGDNR1-T86)

- ***Desire for redemption through school in pupils with a foreign background***

Headteachers in focus group emphasized the critical role of determination and aspiration in achieving academic and professional success for both Italian and immigrant students. One teacher shared an example of former students with immigrant backgrounds who overcame challenges and excelled, including pursuing medical specializations:

It's not that we separate foreigners and send them there, no. I repeat, there are many foreign students who are better than Italians, and I send them to high school, and they build careers. I've met them in the emergency department, working as medical residents. The point is, there is determination. (FG_D_EGDNR4-T466)

Teachers highlighted that while Italian students were observed to focus on immediate financial success and status, the desire for social redemption as a significant motivator for immigrant students (FGD_EGDNR6-T459).

On the part of Italian youngsters there is a desire to have easy money right away; therefore, little commitment for little time. So values change. My colleague had a dream, these pupils have goals that are lower, that is, the gain, the car, the money. (FGD_EGDNR5-T310)

Directly or indirectly this redemption because I don't think everyone actually wants to become a person. Not just because my dad wants me to become a doctor, no, it's also them who sometimes are motivated they understand, they see the reality, the society that works is alive and they roll up their sleeves. (FG_D_EGDNR4-T472)

Teachers observed a connection between this motivation and family culture, particularly in families where highly educated parents work in low-status jobs. These families instill a strong desire for upward mobility in their children:

There is a culture because we have parents who are engineers and who today are cleaning here, without taking away respect from any job, but there is also social redemption even from many Africans in reality (FG-EGDNR4-T255)

Several success stories of motivated immigrant students were shared, illustrating their academic achievements and ambitious educational paths:

Many Africans have this idea of redemption, at least they do. I had a Tunisian who was very good, he had a grade 10, we sent him to Galilei, he didn't want to go, but he went; I always heard him, the desires and the motivation, even parental motivation he told me, crazy and it fits. (FG-EGDNR4-T258)

- ***Considerations Of Different Ethnicities and Approaches to School Choice***

The guidance counselor noted that families' approaches to educational track choices vary across cultural and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting diverse criteria for decision-making:

There is a bit of a distinction to be made about backgrounds because here there are Chinese, there are Moroccans, Algerians, South Americans (...).(EGDR-T50)

She observed that families with a Chinese background often prioritize school proximity and convenience over detailed school information, influenced by parents' work:

The Chinese rarely asked for information and many times they decided on the school for their children based on the proximity to the school, based on the work they [the parents] did. (EGDR-T50)

For example, one Chinese family with two daughters had, the youngest, who was in difficulty, was sent to be a hairdresser because it was the closest place, the oldest, who was a bit cleverer, who came out of here with a bit more skill, was able to enroll at, say, Einaudi [a technical institute, marketing course], which was the school she really liked.(T50)

In this ultimate example, she described a Chinese family where decisions were made according to the daughters' abilities and proximity.

- ***Socioeconomic Influences on School Choice***

Teachers in the focus group highlighted the significant impact of economic needs on students' educational decisions. Some teachers emphasized the anxiety students experience regarding financial pressures (FG_D_EGDNR4-T286). Many students, particularly those from low-income families, prioritize entering the workforce over continuing their studies:

The probable lack of job opportunities, economic crises, families breaking up and everything and they want to start working as soon as possible no matter what course of study they do. (FG_D_EGDNR8-T267)

In line with this observation, one of the interviewed teachers also described how parental anxiety about job prospects often pushes students toward practical, job-oriented paths, as one teacher explained (INT-EGDNR1-T63). as one teacher explained:

I think a real theme is the fear of work (...) you really feel that families are anxious about what these pupils will do. And so, you kind of jump on the idea of doing something concrete, fast and that gives an immediate job outlet. (INT-EGDNR1-T59)

Some teachers pointed to the connection between emigration and immigration experienced by these families, remarking on the persistent economic challenges, despite their ongoing efforts (FG_D_EGDNR7-T293). The broader economic environment, including persistent financial insecurity and shifts in the labor market, also plays a role. One teacher observed:

The economic crisis that we are experiencing, and Europe too, not just Italy, (...)on a macroeconomic level, on a social level (...)also the change in types of work, no? We need to put it like Bauman, liquid labor. That is to say, everything has changed so much and so much, even the system of professions, of jobs, that there is probably... I mean a lot of families are scared (...) so you tend to think well. Mechanics, mechatronics, this can work, and you aim there. (...) I cannot generalize (...) cases in which the parents, who are certainly more sensitive, culturally stronger, let's say, are also those who manage to... direct the youngsters. One also hears many say now I don't want you to make a mistake because I'm telling you so you also question yourself. (INT- EGDNR1-T67)

Teachers noted that this fear of an uncertain future discourages many students from considering university, which they perceive as an inaccessible or impractical investment.

I can't say that there is a predominance of anything, but the fear of the future (...) for example, university for almost all my pupils is already precluded; in the sense that they say 'We can't spend so many years investing in something that doesn't...(...) I think it's like that. (INT- EGDNR1-T67)

Despite this, a teacher pointed out a broader issue among students—their reluctance to engage in challenging or effort-intensive paths, especially when economic success is perceived as achievable with minimal effort (FGD_EGDNR8-T317). Aligned with these observations, the interviewed head teachers noted that economic success is a prevalent aspiration and objective among young

students. One head teacher highlighted how the prospect of earning money significantly motivates many students, often stemming from financial constraints within their families.

I said if you study you'll earn more because so many kids are aiming so much at this thing here, there's this idea of earning money, so it has to be said that many families don't sail in gold, but in short, from here to becoming rich and you're so much there's this idea of earning so much money. (INT-EGDNR3-T134)

The guidance counselor noted that students often struggle with making future decisions due to their young age, limited experience, and the short timeframe for such choices. She observed that students tend to focus on immediate needs, lacking long-term foresight, which makes orientation choices difficult:

There is much less willingness to sacrifice; where there is sacrifice is not meant as a bad thing. In the past there was a bit more focus, they have what they need at their fingertips and so they are only able to think a stone's throw away from their nose and not about the future, the orientation choice is difficult because you ask young people in December, January what they are going to do with their lives. (EGDR-T114)

The counselor highlighted a declining perception of the importance of education among students, noting that they often see examples of individuals achieving economic success without attaining high levels of education. She mentioned challenges faced by professional institutes in engaging students who lack foundational values, motivation or family support:

So many things they will have to experience on their own skin (...) I also hear colleagues from G institution, professional institute, struggling with young people who have no values behind them, no families, no desire to study, who don't give a damn to it [education]. (EGDR-T116)

In response to these observations, the counselor emphasized the importance of guiding and supporting students to foster self-awareness and personal growth.

Head teachers noted that in addition to economic pressures, societal norms and influences like social media and sports organizations contribute to students' preference for quick, effortless success over academic or long-term goals (INT- EGDNR3-T154 & INT- EGDNR3-T136).

Kids now want everything and now, they have a habit of getting even, but also information, anything. They have an attention span now limited to five minutes, precisely because everything they have, they have immediately. So, for them to toil, to search, to delve into things are all stressful, so they prefer to have the immediate pay. Even if the work sucks, who cares? (INT- EGDNR2-T23)

Such attitudes, influenced by figures like social media influencers or athletes, further diminish the appeal of university pathways (INT- EGDNR2-T25).

- ***Excessive Focus on Profession and Earnings Over Culture***

Discussions with headteachers highlighted a widespread prioritization of professional and financial success over cultural and humanistic education (FGD_EGDNR6-T442). A literature teacher lamented:

The excessive focus on the profession(...) and not on saying what kind of person I want to be. And that's just going to leave all this technicality, schools, technical and even high schools are becoming technical for applied sciences. And so goodbye all the humanities; it's all the uselessness of humanistic subjects. (FGD_EGDNR6-T440)

The teacher stressed the importance of cultural knowledge in shaping well-rounded individuals and distinguishing between mere technical skills and those enriched by cultural insight.

The difference between a technician or a person who knows, who has technical skills and another who has technical but also cultural skills and is after the major level (FGD_EGDNR6-T446)

Some teachers observed that achieving wealth has become the central dream for many students (FGD_EGDNR8-T315)

4.5.4.2 Summary of Insights about Orientation

This macro-category, in summary, highlighted difficulties, available resources, and critical areas for future improvement. Insights provided by head teachers and the guidance counselor underscored the key role of parental involvement in the orientation process. Participants observed disparities in parental engagement in orientation, both among Italian and immigrant families. This lack of participation was sometimes attributed to *the complexity of the educational track, limited language proficiency, and unfamiliarity with the education system*. In some cases, participants associated it with prioritizing *convenience over engagement*. According to the data, parental

support and involvement in orientation are influenced by factors such as *parental expectations, aspirations, and cultural and educational background*. Additionally, *parents' opinions, cultural norms, and values* were perceived as key determinants of their level of engagement.

The participants described various situations where peers and siblings influenced students' track decisions. This influence was often considered negative, as students might pursue educational paths that do not align with their own aptitudes and skills. The data revealed that, in the absence of teacher and parental support, students tend to follow their peers' choices. Participants also highlighted cases where parents entrusted siblings or peers within the family with the responsibility of gathering information or encouraged students to follow the educational path of older siblings.

The data highlighted the role of subject teachers in understanding each student and supporting the development of self-awareness. According to the findings, teachers can facilitate track decisions by providing feedback and sharing their individual experiences with students. Participants emphasized that teachers collectively contribute to formulating guidance advice by offering their opinions and sharing

The data revealed instances of mismatch between teachers' opinions and students' preferences or parents' aspirations. Participants also shared their approaches to handling such situations. Mismatches can occur between the track recommended by the orientation council and the aspirations of students and their families. While it is not mandatory to follow these recommendations, the document can influence students' opportunities for enrollment.

As resources and activities, participants highlighted the importance of open days and, where possible, mini-jobs. However, they shared contrasting perspectives about the orientation fair. Some teachers described the event as well-organized, enriching, and an opportunity for students to encounter various schools, interact with peers, and meet future teachers. In contrast, the guidance counselor noted that showcasing all public and private schools together can create confusion and unrealistic expectations for the students.

According to the participants, immigrant students tend to choose tracks that are not university-oriented, often selecting high schools based on geographical proximity. Newcomers are typically allocated to vocational or artistic tracks due to bias. Ultimately, the participants emphasized how financial needs influence students' aspirations for professional and educational tracks, driving them toward options with immediate job prospects. They also highlighted the impact of social beliefs that prioritize economic success.

4.6 Discussion and Reflections

In this section, the findings are organized according to the same categorization used in previous studies, ensuring coherence and easing the reader's understanding. The discussion will focus on the key themes identified in relation to the research questions, examining the various influences on students' orientation processes. These include the role of social support, socio-economic and socio-cultural factors, individual aspects such as identity and discrimination, as well as the impact of language acquisition on educational trajectories. The analysis will also explore the relationships and challenges that shape students' decisions regarding their educational paths.

Social Support in Orientation Process

Social support plays a pivotal role in students' school choice decisions, encompassing guidance from parents, encouragement from teachers, and advice from peers. Research has consistently highlighted the impact of these relationships, with support parents provide to their children and peers (Gonzales et al., 1996), guidance and encouragement from teachers (Baysu et al., 2021).

This section examines the findings on the role of social support in the educational orientation process of students, emphasizing the influence of parents, peers, and teachers. It also explores the disparities and cultural factors that shape these dynamics, particularly focusing on the unique challenges immigrant students face.

- **Parents Influence in Orientation**

Supportive relationships with family and school positively impact immigrant students' academic performance, while disruptions in these relationships can hinder success (Hill, & Tyson, 2009). This study highlighted similar findings, with head teachers and guidance counselors emphasizing the critical role of parental support and involvement in students' educational lives, particularly during orientation and decision-making about school tracks (EGDR-T114). However, this data revealed notable disparities in the level of parental support across families (FG-EGDNR4-220; EGDR-T108). The data highlighted that parents can facilitate smoother transitions to higher secondary education by fostering interactions with teachers and making informed decisions through active engagement in school-parent relationships. For instance, opportunities such as meetings with teachers and guidance counselors were identified as instrumental in supporting students (INT-EGDNR1-T59).

Cultural and ethnic backgrounds were frequently linked to variations in parental involvement, as highlighted in focus group discussions. In some families with a foreign background, traditional roles defined by ethnic and cultural norms may not align with expectations of parental engagement in education (FG-EGDNR8-T425). The head teachers noted higher levels of parental involvement in Italian families compared to immigrant families (FG-EGDNR8-T429). However, the students' perspective only differentiates how parents are engaged in their educational guidance. Schools should implement culturally sensitive strategies to promote parental involvement, especially among families with foreign backgrounds. Initiatives like tailored workshops, accessible communication, and teacher-parent meetings can bridge cultural gaps, encourage engagement, and support informed decision-making during key educational transitions, ultimately improving immigrant students' academic outcomes.

Research shows parental education strongly influences students' academic success. Mantovani et al. (2018) found immigrant students with educated parents often outperformed their peers. In Italy, this link is distinct, as many immigrant parents hold unrecognized advanced degrees, highlighting education's impact over professional status. Counselor and head teachers noted that parents' educational levels significantly influence their engagement in making informed choices about their children's education (EGDR-T108). Parents with higher educational backgrounds were better equipped to seek information and actively participate in their child's academic journey. For example, some parents, despite working in menial jobs due to the non-recognition of their degrees, leveraged their cultural capital to support their children's aspirations by attending open days and encouraging educational advancement (EGDR-T108).

Additionally, some head teachers emphasized that parents with university-level education often have higher academic aspirations for their children. However, these aspirations can sometimes be unrealistic, as illustrated by a teacher's account of parents insisting on academic tracks misaligned with their child's strengths (INT-EGDNR1-T45). These findings underline the need for schools to facilitate effective communication with parents, ensuring aspirations are both ambitious and realistic to optimize students' educational pathways.

The findings reinforce existing research that parents' expectations significantly shape children's academic outcomes (Lenkeit et al., 2015; Pong et al., 2007; Tjaden, 2017; Vakalahi, 2009). Hattie's (2008) meta-analysis identified parental aspirations and expectations as the most influential home-related factors affecting student achievement. The data indicated that parents'

unfulfilled dreams and ambitions often influence students' educational choices. Examples from interviews and group discussions illustrated how these aspirations could steer students' decisions (e.g., FG-EGDNR4-T245; INT-EGDNR3-T88). On the other hand, data from student focus groups revealed that while some students valued their parents' input, others felt pressured, leading to uncertainty and reconsideration of their choices (e.g., FGS4/659-SSM2). Findings also showed that cultural and traditional factors also shape parental expectations. Teachers noted that in Italian families, expectations were often influenced by the educational and professional backgrounds of parents or siblings, favoring classical or scientific tracks, sometimes creating challenges for students (INT-EGDNR1-T43). In contrast, immigrant families were more likely to prioritize economic concerns, aspire for quicker workforce entry over prolonged academic pursuits (INT-EGDNR2-T9) expecting that students to achieve better economic outcomes than their own (EGDR-T56). However, both groups of families were sometimes observed to have expectations misaligned with their children's aptitudes and skills. Head teachers shared examples of such incongruences, noting the tension between parental ambitions and students' abilities (INT-EGDNR1-T45; INT-EGDNR2-T23) showing some difficulties in recognizing and accepting their children for who they are. This reflects differing value systems and priorities, which can shape the support provided to students.

The extent of parental influence on educational decisions varies also by parents' knowledge about the education system (e.g., Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011; Haxton, 2011). Head teachers and counselors reported that some parents struggled to critically evaluate or follow their children's choices due to the complexity of school systems and decision-making processes (FG-EGDNR4-T258; EGDR-T108). To address this, schools and counselors could implement initiatives to better inform parents, offering clear explanations and support to help them navigate the complexities of educational pathways. This could lead to more informed decision-making and increased parental involvement in students' academic journeys.

In some cases, parents' opinions strongly influenced students' decisions (INT-EGDNR3-T76; INT-EGDNR2-T64). Head teachers reported varying views on students' autonomy. Some observed that Italian families allowed more freedom, while others noted that immigrant families exerted more control over educational choices (INT-EGDNR2-T62). Conversely, it was suggested that immigrant parents might offer more freedom due to fewer preconceived notions or socio-economic constraints (INT-EGDNR1-T37). Students' perspective indicated that some students

appreciated their parents' support and independence in decision-making, finding it empowering and confidence-boosting (e.g., FGS4/654-SSM1). Others felt pressured by parental expectations, which led to stress and reevaluation of their choices (e.g., FGS4/649-SSM5). Many students valued parental feedback as an opportunity to reflect and refine their decisions (e.g., FGS1/376-SSM2), underscoring the importance of constructive parent-child interactions in the decision-making process. Which is in line with the findings of (Bell et al., 2013), emphasizing the need for balanced, empowering parental involvement in students' educational choices.

Research by Seghers et al., (2019) highlights the challenges immigrant parents face in educational decision-making due to limited social and cultural capital. Unlike native parents who often use extensive social networks to gather information about school and make recommendations, immigrant parents may lack similar resources. Their decision-making is influenced by their educational and migration backgrounds, which adds layers of complexity that go beyond differences in social class. This creates a disadvantage for immigrant families compared to native peers, who benefit from broader social support. These findings align with the with the experiences shared in this study, where some students described how their parents used their social circles to gather information and help make informed educational choices (FGS2/213-SSM5). In contrast, students from immigrant families often emphasized the guidance they received from relatives or community members, which was primarily focused on future job opportunities rather than educational pathways. For example, one student shared how their decision to pursue a career in hairdressing was influenced by an uncle who owned a salon in the area (FGS1/243/2-SSM7). This narrative illustrates how immigrant families may rely on practical, career-oriented advice from their immediate social networks, which are often shaped by local employment prospect rather than broader educational pathways.

- **Peer's Influence on Orientation**

Research highlights the significant influence of peer relationships on academic choices, especially among immigrant students (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Teachers and counselors noted that peers often shape track decisions, particularly when support from parents or teachers is lacking (FGD-EGDNR7-T399; EGDR-T104). For instance, one recently immigrated student switched from a linguistic lyceum to a dance and ballet lyceum based on friends' recommendations (FGS2/139-SSM5).

The data highlighted that the fear of abandonment and loneliness in a new environment often amplifies this reliance on peers. However, such influence can sometimes lead to mismatched educational choices, either too ambitious or overly limited (INT-EGDNR2-T56; EGDR-T102). Some students explained that their initial perception of the school environment contributed to feeling of isolation and a tendency to withdraw socially.

On the other hand, students shared that firsthand experiences from former students inspired them, offering insights and confidence in decision-making. This underscores the need for schools to foster inclusion by providing structured guidance for immigrant students, reducing their overreliance on peers. Creating opportunities for interaction with former students can also empower current students by offering relatable, concrete examples to guide their decisions.

The data indicated that siblings sometimes take on “parental responsibilities”, as head teachers defined, especially in managing bureaucratic processes or providing guidance due to parents' difficulty navigating the educational system (FGD-EGDNR8-T431 & FGD-EGDNR4-T415). In line with this finding, students, particularly those from immigrant families, shared how they received guidance from older siblings or cousins, who helped them gather concrete information about schools. For instance, some 1.5 generation immigrant students shared how they chose a technical institution based on their cousin’s advice to attend an the open-day at the school (FGS3/319/1-SSM4). Schools and community may address this gap by implementing more informative and facilitative activities particularly for immigrant families. Additionally, both head teachers and the guidance counselor noted that parents, particularly in immigrant families, sometimes encourage their children to follow the educational paths of older siblings without considering differences in aptitudes and interests (FGD-EGDNR4-T404; EGDR-T102). This tendency was linked to parents' limited knowledge and capacity to navigate the education system, which often restricts students' choices and discourages exploration and new experiences. To address this, policies aimed at improving the integration of immigrant families should be implemented.

- **Teachers Influence in Orientation**

The exploration of vocational preferences is recognized as a critical developmental task during adolescence, as outlined in foundational developmental theories (Havighurst, 1948; Super, 1957, 1963). Schools play a pivotal role in shaping students' career exploration and decision-making

processes by providing opportunities for self-assessment, skill development, and exposure to various career paths (Hirschi et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2010). The data emphasized teacher's role in fostering self-awareness through school subjects and classroom interactions. In particular, the data highlighted the literature teachers' efforts to encourage reflection and self-assessment, which contribute to shaping students' identities and helping them make thoughtful decisions (FGD-EGDNR5-328).

The findings underscored the importance of helping students align their educational choices with their passions, aptitudes, and talents, as these factors ultimately shape their skills and knowledge (FGD-EGDNR4-332). Furthermore, the head teachers and counselor stressed the need for students to develop a long-term vision for their future paths, aligning their aspirations with a realistic understanding of their chosen careers (INT-EGDNR1-T33). Based on data from head teachers and students, extracurricular activities help reduce disparities by providing students with opportunities to explore their talents and aptitudes while enhancing self-awareness in educational decision-making.

Supportive relationships with teachers, as highlighted in the literature, play a critical role in fostering school adjustment and academic achievement (e.g., Buyse et al., 2009; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Hughes et al., 2001; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Phelan et al., 1998; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007). Data illustrated that students frequently seek their verbal and non-verbal feedback (e.g., FG_D_EGDNR7-T384) and rely on them as trusted figures for advice and reassurance regarding their educational paths (e.g., FG_D_EGDNR7-T364, FG_D_EGDNR7-T362, INT-EGDNR1-T27).

Some students appreciated teachers' guidance but noted potential bias from their subject expertise. For example, one student observed that teachers might prioritize their subject over students' broader interests and goals (FGS4/607/2-SSM1). These findings underscore the importance of teacher training in unbiased, student-centered advising. Professional development in career guidance and collaborative decision-making can help align advice with students' needs, fostering trust and improved outcomes.

Narratives from teachers and counselor highlighted that they often consider family involvement when recommending educational tracks, noting that limited parental support increases dropout risks. To mitigate this, they may suggest less-demanding paths to provide students with achievable goals and reduce challenges (FG_D_EGDNR4-T457 & INT-EGDNR2-T74). Teachers also

emphasized how disadvantaged neighborhoods, with prevalent delinquent peer groups, exacerbate risks for disengaged students lacking family and school support. Low parental expectations and limited engagement are linked to higher dropout risks (Rumberger,1995). Effective parental monitoring, which depends on both tracking behaviors and adolescents' willingness to share information, serves as a key protective factor against delinquency and academic challenges (Lionetti et al., 2019; Stattin & Kerr,2000).

Research highlights that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and empathy toward students' futures significantly influence academic achievement (Goodwin & Stanton, 2022). The data underscores recurring mismatches between teachers' and students' aspirations in track decision, revealing the complexity of guiding students toward realistic and fulfilling educational choices. Teachers described strategies such as encouraging self-reflection, involving families, and proposing alternatives aligned with students' abilities and interests (FGD-EG5-334; FGD-EGDNR4-T247; INT-EGDNR1-T27; INT-EGDNR3-T97; INT-EGDNR1-T31).

Teacher expectations, however, can significantly impact student outcomes and may contribute to ethnic disparities when influenced by biases (Stiefel et al., 2007). Many teachers emphasized the importance of aligning educational tracks with students' academic strengths and study habits. For instance, one teacher recounted advising a student against pursuing an unsuitable school, (FG_D-EGDNR4-T247). They also described efforts to dissuade a student from following a familial pattern into a technical chemistry track, citing a lack of aptitude for the subject (INT-EGDNR1-T27).

Reflecting on the narratives shared in this section, the perspective of immigrant students is powerfully echoed in Hakuzwimana's (2024 *bisogna inserire numero di pagina*) words: *“They’ll do better in vocational school, they’ll have fewer problems. At 15, none of us had the courage to ask if that was true, but the older ones explained to us that sometimes the answers come with time, because first, we have to understand them: whether it was us who had fewer problems or the teachers who advised us to take other paths, who never really met us.”* This quote poignantly reflects the complexities immigrant students face in navigating educational decisions. It emphasizes that, while teachers' guidance is valuable, it often comes from a place of limited understanding of the students' true needs and aspirations. The challenge, then, lies in creating a system where students are not only given advice, but are also truly seen and understood by those who guide them. The findings of this study suggest that teacher training should focus on both

academic content and fostering empathy for students' aspirations and backgrounds. Teachers need to recognize mismatches between their expectations and students' goals, ensuring realistic, personalized guidance. Reflective practices can reduce bias and promote equitable, student-centered support, particularly for immigrant and minority students. Strengthening collaboration with families can further improve decision-making, guiding students toward suitable and empowering educational paths.

Navigating Track Selection: Perspectives from Counselors, Students, and Parents

According to Lauermaun et al. (2020), students' beliefs about their abilities are closely linked to their school grades. If they perceive that their track is misaligned with their strengths or aspirations, their self-concept could be negatively impacted, potentially leading to decreased motivation and academic performance. Our students' narratives reveal mixed experiences regarding the alignment between their preferences and the guidance provided by the advice council. For some, the council's recommendations aligned with their aspirations, particularly when supported by strong academic performance. These students—often native or second-generation immigrants—felt validated and encouraged by the confirmation of their preferred tracks (FGS3/273-SSM5; FGS3/291-SSM8). However, many students reported misalignment, leading to frustration and disappointment. Some, particularly those with university-oriented goals, described feeling disheartened when their preferences were overlooked. For these students, the mismatch sometimes served as a motivator to improve academic performance in hopes of influencing future track placements (FGS3/267/1-SSM5; FGS3/252-SSM2; FGS3/287/2-SSM7). Conversely, others experienced a decline in motivation and performance, feeling undervalued or misunderstood by the advice council. This led to disengagement and reduced effort in school (FGS4/600-SSM2; FGS4/613-SSM9). These findings suggest that aligning students' self-perceptions, academic abilities, and track recommendations is crucial for motivation and success. Misalignment can harm students' self-concept, leading to disengagement and lower performance. Guidance councils should adopt a more personalized approach, considering students' aspirations and strengths, and involve families in the decision-making process to enhance motivation and academic outcomes.

Despite the influence of guidance recommendations, not all students adhered to the council's advice. The head teachers noted instances where students chose tracks misaligned with their academic level or areas of interest (FGD-EGDNR7-T203). In some cases, students actively

pursued their preferred paths, even when these choices conflicted with the recommendations. These decisions illustrate students' agency in shaping their educational trajectories while highlighting the limitations of the guidance process in addressing diverse aspirations (FGS4/447/3-SSM9).

This interplay between counselor advice, student autonomy, and parental expectations suggests the need for a more holistic and flexible guidance framework. Efforts to improve alignment must account for students' aspirations while providing families with clear, evidence-based information about the long-term implications of track choices. Enhanced communication and support during critical transitions, such as the shift to high school, could help mitigate risks of failure and dropout. Ultimately, fostering a collaborative approach that integrates professional advice with students' and parents' perspectives may better support successful educational outcomes.

School and Community Collaboration in Educational Track Guidance

The data emphasized the pivotal role of school and guidance counselor as a key figure in navigating the complexities of educational tracks and pathways (e.g., INT-EGDNR3-T22). A range of initiatives were identified aiming at engaging both students and their parents, including informative classroom sessions and both collective and individual meetings (INT-EGDNR3-T32 & FGD-EGDNR4-T490-491-496). The findings indicated guidance counselor's approach during classroom sessions, where they share comprehensive information about tracks and schools, engage students by answering their questions (EGDR-T30), and utilizing multimedia resources alongside online materials (EGDR-T46) as well as use of guidebook to explore their options (EGDR-T40). The narratives show that these activities are resources offered by higher secondary schools and the city which are integrated with the school services and guidance counselor's activities.

The findings indicated the importance of collaboration in gathering information about students' aptitudes, skills, and academic performance across school subjects in order to formulate the formal Council track recommendation (EGDR-T12). This teamwork also aims to ensure that students are matched with educational tracks and schools that align with their abilities and interests, fostering more informed and suitable choices for their academic futures (FGD-EGDNR8-T514). It addresses cases of uncertainty or disengagement, encouraging and supporting disengaged students, particularly those who seems to be without parental involvement (FGD-EGDNR4-T507).

Students expressed mixed opinions regarding the services, activities and council advice. In particular, some found this advice helpful in resolving uncertainties about school choices (FGS4/574-SSM5), while others felt the process increased their confusion (FGS4/518-SSM9). Additionally, students appreciated meetings involving parents and teachers, which they felt provided more tailored advice on track selection based on their strengths, interests, and academic performance (FGS2/283-SSM2). These insights highlight the need for clear, collaborative guidance efforts tailored to the needs of both students and families.

The Role of Language Acquisition in Educational Trajectories

Language proficiency is a cornerstone of academic success, shaping aspirations and moderating their connection to achievement (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2020). Immigrant students who frequently use the destination language are better able to translate aspirations into strong academic performance, reflecting high aspirations and metacognitive skills (Tseng, 2006). A factor emphasized by both guidance counselor and head teachers. Guidance counselor noted that limited Italian proficiency delays curriculum engagement and influences high school choices (EGDR-T80). The data indicated that newly arrived students are often placed in lower classes to prioritize language acquisition (INT-EGDNR3-T62). According to Guidance counselor Placement decisions, however, often revealed biases, with newly arrived students being directed to less demanding tracks such as art schools or lower grades, sometimes without fully assessing their readiness (EGDR-T82).

Across the data from from headteachers and guidance counselor, the connection between language proficiency and academic performance was consistently observed. The counselor highlighted that linguistic gaps hinder students' understanding of theory-heavy subjects, creating barriers to achieving high grades (e.g., EGDR-T82). Both teachers and counselors noted that a lack of proficiency in the language of instruction narrows the educational opportunities for recent immigrant students. However, head teachers provided examples of students who showed significant academic improvement after overcoming initial language struggles (INT-EGDNR1-T55; INT-EGDNR3-T120).

Students whose parents lack proficiency in the host country's language may face additional challenges in their in developing Italian language skills, which can, influence their academic performance (Ciccarelli, 2019). Some students with immigrant background mentioned using their

heritage language at home due to their parents' limited Italian proficiency. While this practice helps maintain cultural and linguistic ties, it also reflects the multilingual environment in which these students navigate their education. Research on multilingualism (e.g., Dusi et al., 2022) highlights that proficiency in the heritage language supports second-language acquisition, countering common misconceptions about bilingualism hindering language learning (e.g., FGS3/238-SSM8). Findings of head teachers' narrative reflected on biases in the orientation process. Some teachers noted skepticism among teachers about immigrant students' potential, particularly for demanding tracks like scientific high schools. However, some teachers stressed the belief that strong motivation could enable students to overcome linguistic barriers (INT-EGDNR1-T29).

Multilingualism is intrinsically tied to the gradual process of language acquisition, occurring as individuals encounter new languages that integrate into their repertoire. These languages collectively contribute to the development of linguistic-communicative competence—a dynamic set of interrelated skills, abilities, and strategies that individuals draw upon across the languages they engage with throughout their lives (Coppola, 2016). However, proficiency in language of instruction is essential for academic success, and limited skills can hinder immigrant students' educational opportunities. Schools should prioritize language acquisition while making placement decisions, ensuring they are based on both language skills and students' potential. Teachers and counselors should avoid biases and work closely with families to support language development, helping students integrate better and achieve their academic goals. Tailored support that enhances language skills and metacognitive strategies will empower immigrant students and families to overcome challenges and succeed.

Socio-Economic and Socio-Cultural Perspectives in Orientation Process

The orientation process, through which students navigate their educational and professional futures, is deeply influenced by both socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Insights from head teachers and guidance counselors reveal the significant challenges and motivations shaping students' choices. Many students, due to their young age and limited life experience, struggle to make future-oriented decisions within a compressed timeframe for educational track selection. As a result, there is a marked focus on short-term needs, which complicates the decision-making process (e.g., FG_D_EGDNR8-T260; EGDR-T114).

The teachers and the counselor also highlighted students' perceptions of education's value, which are influenced by examples of individuals achieving economic success without formal qualifications. This undermines their motivation and engagement with education, particularly in professional institutes (e.g., *FG_D_EGDNR8-T317*

In previous chapter (Chapter 3) the socioeconomic challenges immigrants face was discussed (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Research has explored how low-income parents view their children's educational success as a form of "redemption" from their own past struggles (Rondini, 2015). Additionally, studies on immigrant-origin students show how they transform migration disadvantages into educational advantages. Educational autobiographies reveal how migration fosters non-cognitive skills, such as resilience, which help students overcome adversity and succeed academically (Santangati, 2018). Findings of this study showed that while some head teachers found no differences between Italian and immigrant students, some others noted that the students from immigrant background are often more motivated than their Italian peers by the desire of social redemption (e.g., *FG_D_EGDNR4-T276*, *FG_D_EGDNR8-T271* & *FG_D_EGDNR4-T474*). Their narratives highlighted the role of cultural background in shaping this drive, noting how some families see education as a pathway to social redemption despite previous hardships (e.g., *FG-EGDNR4-T255*).

Socio-economic factors, such as poverty and associated risks, can significantly limit students' educational opportunities and negatively impact their psychological well-being. In addition, socio-economic stressors like long-term parental unemployment, single-parenthood, and mental health challenges within the family further hinder students' engagement with education (Figlio et al., 2017). The data from headteachers and guidance counselor highlight the influence of financial challenges on students' educational choices. Economic pressures often lead students to prioritize entering the workforce over continuing their education (*FG_D_EGDNR8-T267*). Furthermore, findings showed that parental anxiety about their children's future employment opportunities pushes them to pursue educational paths that promise immediate, concrete job outcomes (*INT-EGDNR1-T63*). According to headteachers, persistent poverty leads to a perception of limited opportunities for improvement, which shapes students' decisions (*FG_D_EGDNR6-T301*). Some headteachers also observed connections between students' educational choices and the migration experiences of their families. It was noted that these families, despite years of hard work, often fail to improve their economic situation, influencing the aspirations and choices of their children

(FG_D_EGDNR7-T293). Some students explained how the future financial outlook creates uncertainty in choosing between pursuing their passions or opting for an immediate job solution. Another important point found in this data was the choice of the school based on geographical proximity. Across the data it emerged that the immigrant students economically cannot afford private schools. This limitation narrows the choices of high school for low SES and immigrant students. The data from head teachers and students also indicated the dependence on the public transportation for their parents' limitations in driving. The research in Italy shows the segregation and marginalization of immigrant students in many Italian cities due to the home-school mobility (Cordini et al., 2019). Policies should focus on increasing funding for public schools, improving access to public transportation, subsidizing travel costs for low-income families, and implement measures to combat school segregation, ensuring equitable educational opportunities for immigrant and low SES students.

Individual and psychological aspects: Discrimination, Cultural Identity, and Social Integration

The experience of discrimination exposes systemic and interpersonal biases that disproportionately marginalize students with immigrant backgrounds, affecting their academic and social integration (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). The data showed that challenges related to cultural identity are also significant. Teachers highlighted that some students struggle to embrace their heritage, opting to conceal their background to fit in or avoid bullying and discrimination. This can lead to disengagement from school and feelings of alienation.

Some immigrant students described negative experiences with peers, including instances of bullying and discrimination in the classroom. These experiences fostered avoidance behaviors and made it difficult for them to engage with the school environment (FGS3/126-SSM7 & FGS3/99-SSM8).

In addition to structural and linguistic barriers, students from immigrant backgrounds often face challenges related to their cultural identity. According to the data, some students struggle to acknowledge or embrace their cultural roots, frequently concealing their background due to feelings of shame or a desire to assimilate (INT-EGDNR2-T39). This internal conflict affects how they navigate their identity in school settings. Teachers shared instances of muslim students trying to conceal their cultural practices to fit in despite challenges and conflicts with family and other

Muslim peers (INT-EGDNR2-T39). This finding aligns with Hakuzawina's observations about the tendency to hide one's ethnic-cultural identity in pursuit of social and academic acceptance:

"Those who were asked to perform in our version of the best possible one gave up. They gave up on their origins, their belonging, their identity, on laughing at a secret joke whispered around a table that unites as much as blood and surname. We gave up a part of ourselves to try to fit in among the desks and in the registers' grades." (Hakuzawina, 2024, p41)

This sentiment underscores the sacrifices many immigrant students make to align with dominant cultural norms, often at the expense of their own heritage and identity.

4.6.1 Limitations

This qualitative study offers several strengths and challenges. A notable strength lies in the selection of the research site, as data were collected from a school with the highest concentration of immigrant students and socio-economically disadvantaged Italian students. This setting provided a rich context for exploring the intersection of socio-economic and cultural factors affecting academic outcomes. Additionally, the study incorporated data from multiple sources, including focus groups and interviews. This approach allowed for the collection of both collective opinions and narratives, as well as individual perspectives, enabling a nuanced analysis and the emergence of contrasting viewpoints.

However, the study also faced several limitations. First, while the sample included a substantial number of immigrant students, most participants were from the second generation or the 1.5 generation, limiting insights into the experiences of first-generation immigrant students. Additionally, the number of head teachers involved in the study was small, and there was only one guidance counselor, which constrained the diversity of institutional viewpoints. These challenges impacted the depth of the analysis regarding certain roles within the school environment, particularly in relation to guidance and leadership practices. Future research shall explore the longitudinal impacts of track choices on students' academic and professional trajectories.

4.7 Conclusions

The present qualitative study employed the empirical phenomenological method to analyze immigrant students' perceptions of their experiences with track selection while transitioning from lower to higher secondary education in Italy and their teachers too.

The key findings indicated that immigrant students encounter several challenges in the track selection process, such as linguistic barriers, limited access to information, and the pressure of making significant decisions within a constrained timeframe. These difficulties are exacerbated by socio-economic and cultural stressors that shape their academic trajectories. While social connections and support networks play a crucial role in helping students gather information, these networks often fail to provide balanced or expansive guidance. Community sources frequently steer students toward vocational paths by emphasizing immediate job prospects rather than long-term academic potential.

Teachers, guidance counselors, and parents were identified as pivotal figures in influencing students' choices. Teachers, despite their efforts to guide students, sometimes introduce biases related to students' perceived abilities, linguistic difficulties, or cultural backgrounds. Parents' involvement varies significantly, with immigrant families often prioritizing practical outcomes and economic success over long-term aspirations, while native families are more likely to base track selection on traditional expectations or assimilation into the broader cultural norms. Peer influence also emerges as a critical factor, particularly among newly immigrated students, who may base their choices on friends' or siblings' recommendations. This reliance on peer input highlights the vulnerability of students who lack robust institutional or family support.

The narratives also highlighted that students' own experiences within the school environment, as well as interactions with individuals involved in different tracks or careers, play a crucial role in helping them develop a clearer vision of their future and influence their track decisions.

Several institutional practices were identified as facilitators in the decision-making process, including open days, mini jobs, guidance class sessions, and personalized counseling. However, the study revealed inconsistencies in their effectiveness, particularly for immigrant students. Systemic biases, a lack of tailored approaches, and linguistic barriers often undermine these practices. Personalized support, proactive engagement with families, and culturally sensitive strategies emerged as essential components for mitigating these challenges and fostering better outcomes for immigrant students.

The study underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the systemic inequities faced by immigrant students during this critical transition, above regarding their languages' skills and proficiencies. Schools must adopt inclusive practices that actively involve immigrant families, provide accessible information, and offer unbiased guidance tailored to students' unique needs. Additionally, there is a need to improve self-awareness and foster a more inclusive climate that allows students to express their cultural identity. Collaboration between schools, families, and communities is essential to create an environment where all students can make informed and meaningful educational choices.

This chapter aimed to explore and identify the challenges immigrant students face in the track selection process and the factors influencing their decisions. Addressing these challenges through tailored interventions is crucial to ensuring better educational outcomes for immigrant students. The next chapter will examine these factors quantitatively, integrating the findings of this study with existing literature to provide a broader, statistical understanding of the patterns and influences identified in this chapter.

Appendix

Table 4.4 Codebook – Interviews with Head-Teachers

Macro-Category	Category	Label
The Classroom System	Class Characteristics	Perception of Heterogeneous Class
		Heterogeneity of the Class from A Didactic Percentage Of Students with A Migratory Background in Classes
		Students With Special Educational Needs (SEN) And Behavioral Difficulties
Teacher's Professional Experience		Teacher's Perception: Evolution And Cohesion of The Class Group Through Laboratory Activities
		Subjects Taught
		Teacher's Professional Career Path Teacher's Educational Background Characteristics of the Teacher
Parental Involvement in The Student's School Life		Teachers' Perception of The Involvement of Foreign
		Involvement Of Foreign Parents with Linguistic Difficulties
		Cultural And Linguistic Mediators for Foreign Parents
		School-Family Collaboration in Education and Inclusion
		Teacher's Shock at Parents' Behavior on The Football Field
Cases Of SEN Students Without Certification and Parents in Conflict		
Guidance (Orientation)	Parental Influence in Guidance	Influence Of Parents' Opinions
		Parents' Expectations and Aspirations in School Choice
		Comparison With Parents and Reactions to Guidance Advice
		Esempi Di Incongruenza Delle Aspettative Dei Genitori Con Le Attitudini Degli Studenti

Confronto Con I Genitori E Reazioni Al Consiglio
Orientativo

Peer Influence in Guidance	Tendency To Be Influenced by Peers' Choices Influence Of Family Members' Experiences on School Choice Non-Advising Teachers' Guidance Activities and The Role of Teacher Councils
Non-Advising Teachers' Guidance Activities and The Role Of Teacher Councils	Giving Advice: Based On Performance and Potential – Role of Teacher Council Giving Advice: Independent Thinking Giving Advice: Considering the Long-Term Teacher 'S Advice for Evaluation of High School Programs Teacher 'S Advice for Suggestions for Students Attending Open Schools for Information Gathering Examples Of Teacher Advice Example Of Discord Between Teacher Advice and Student/Family Choice Self-Evaluation Of One's Skills
	Examples Of Student Choices in Foreign Languages
	The Role of Teachers in Guiding SEN Students
	Modes Of Interaction with Students for Guidance
	Teacher's Educational Work
	Completion Of Questionnaires to Collect "Desires" – Tools for Guidance
	Challenges And Roles of Teachers in Guidance – Role of Teacher Council
Guidance Council/Teacher Council at The Collegial Level	Examples Of Discrepancies and Agreements Between Teacher Guidance and Students' Choices Influence Of Language Skills on Guidance Advice Example Of Language Skills' Influence on Guidance Advice
Students with Migratory Backgrounds	Tendency To Choose Easy Paths – Teachers' Perspectives on School Choices for Students with Migratory Backgrounds

	<p>Students With Migratory Backgrounds Hiding Their Cultural Identity – Teachers’ Perspectives on School Choices</p> <p>Examples Of Placement and Language Instruction Skills for Foreign Students – Language Skills</p> <p>Language Not Obstructive for Foreign SEN Students (Linguistic Difficulties of Foreign SEN Students)</p>
	<p>Underestimated/Undervalued Language Skills of Foreign Students in School Choices</p> <p>Encountering A Different School System</p>
Guidance Activities	<p>Presence And Activities of The Guidance Representative – Activities Managed by The Guidance Representative Teacher</p> <p>Evening Meetings with Parents – Activities Managed by The Guidance Representative Teacher</p> <p>Orientation Fair</p> <p>Open Days and School Attendance Before Choosing a School</p> <p>Ideas For Activities to Implement</p> <p>Possibility Of Re-Guidance in June</p>
Students’ Perspective Narrated by Teachers	<p>Better Performance of Girls Compared to Boys</p> <p>Influence Of Girls’ Involvement in Family Tasks on School Commitment</p> <p>Aspirations And Choices</p> <p>Students’ Aspirations and Goals: Wealth and Success</p> <p>Influence Of Foreign Families’ Expectations for Economic Independence on Guidance (Role of Socioeconomic Status And Economic Needs In School Choices)</p> <p>Students’ Challenges and Decisions in School Choices</p> <p>Difficulty Of Choice Due to Age and Numerous Options</p>

Note: Macro-Categories (N = 2), Categories (N = 10), Labels (N = 59).

Table 4.5 Codebook – Interviews with Head-Teachers

Macro-Category	Category	Label
The Classroom System	Class Characteristics	Perception of Heterogeneous Class
		Heterogeneity of the Class from A Didactic Percentage Of Students with A Migratory Background in Classes
		Students With Special Educational Needs (SEN) And Behavioral Difficulties
Teacher's Professional Experience	Teacher's Professional Experience	Subjects Taught
		Teacher's Professional Career Path
		Teacher's Educational Background
Parental Involvement in The Student's School Life	Parental Involvement in The Student's School Life	Teachers' Perception of The Involvement of Foreign
		Involvement Of Foreign Parents with Linguistic Difficulties
		Cultural And Linguistic Mediators for Foreign Parents School-Family Collaboration in Education and Inclusion
Guidance (Orientation)	Parental Influence in Guidance	Teacher's Shock at Parents' Behavior on The Football Field
		Cases Of SEN Students Without Certification and Parents in Conflict
		Influence Of Parents' Opinions
Guidance (Orientation)	Parental Influence in Guidance	Parents' Expectations and Aspirations in School Choice
		Comparison With Parents and Reactions to Guidance Advice
		Esempi Di Incongruenza Delle Aspettative Dei Genitori Con Le Attitudini Degli Studenti

Confronto Con I Genitori E Reazioni Al Consiglio
Orientativo

Peer Influence in Guidance	Tendency To Be Influenced by Peers' Choices Influence Of Family Members' Experiences on School Choice Non-Advising Teachers' Guidance Activities and The Role of Teacher Councils
Non-Advising Teachers' Guidance Activities and The Role Of Teacher Councils	Giving Advice: Based On Performance and Potential – Role of Teacher Council Giving Advice: Independent Thinking Giving Advice: Considering the Long-Term Teacher 'S Advice for Evaluation of High School Programs Teacher 'S Advice for Suggestions for Students Attending Open Schools for Information Gathering Examples Of Teacher Advice Example Of Discord Between Teacher Advice and Student/Family Choice Self-Evaluation Of One's Skills
	Examples Of Student Choices in Foreign Languages
	The Role of Teachers in Guiding SEN Students
	Modes Of Interaction with Students for Guidance
	Teacher's Educational Work
	Completion Of Questionnaires to Collect "Desires" – Tools for Guidance
	Challenges And Roles of Teachers in Guidance – Role of Teacher Council
Guidance Council/Teacher Council at The Collegial Level	Examples Of Discrepancies and Agreements Between Teacher Guidance and Students' Choices Influence Of Language Skills on Guidance Advice Example Of Language Skills' Influence on Guidance Advice
Students with Migratory Backgrounds	Tendency To Choose Easy Paths – Teachers' Perspectives on School Choices for Students with Migratory Backgrounds

	<p>Students With Migratory Backgrounds Hiding Their Cultural Identity – Teachers’ Perspectives on School Choices</p> <p>Examples Of Placement and Language Instruction Skills for Foreign Students – Language Skills</p> <p>Language Not Obstructive for Foreign SEN Students (Linguistic Difficulties of Foreign SEN Students)</p>
	<p>Underestimated/Undervalued Language Skills of Foreign Students in School Choices</p> <p>Encountering A Different School System</p>
Guidance Activities	<p>Presence And Activities of The Guidance Representative – Activities Managed by The Guidance Representative Teacher</p> <p>Evening Meetings with Parents – Activities Managed by The Guidance Representative Teacher</p> <p>Orientation Fair</p> <p>Open Days and School Attendance Before Choosing a School</p> <p>Ideas For Activities to Implement</p> <p>Possibility Of Re-Guidance in June</p>
Students’ Perspective Narrated by Teachers	<p>Better Performance of Girls Compared to Boys</p> <p>Influence Of Girls’ Involvement in Family Tasks on School Commitment</p> <p>Aspirations And Choices</p> <p>Students’ Aspirations and Goals: Wealth and Success</p> <p>Influence Of Foreign Families’ Expectations for Economic Independence on Guidance (Role of Socioeconomic Status And Economic Needs In School Choices)</p> <p>Students’ Challenges and Decisions in School Choices</p> <p>Difficulty Of Choice Due to Age and Numerous Options</p>

Note: Macro-Categories ($N = 2$), Categories ($N = 13$), Labels ($N = 71$).

Table 4.6 Codebook- Interview with Guidance Counselor

Macro-Category	Category	Label
Class System	Teacher Experience	Subjects Taught Involvement in Guidance and Support for Students with Migratory Backgrounds
	Class Characteristics	Presence of Students with Migratory Backgrounds Level of Activity and Participation in the Class Group (Teacher's Negative Interpretation of Parents) Presence of Students with SLD and SEN and the Case of a SEN Student at Risk Intervention by Educators in the Classroom for SLD Students
	Students with Linguistic Difficulties and New Arrivals	Considerations for the Integration of Newly Arrived Foreign Students Literacy Activities Outside the Classroom for New Arrivals Management of Literacy Activities Entrusted to Cooperatives
Guidance (orientation)	Parental Involvement in Guidance	Parents Present with Linguistic Difficulties Parents' Educational/Cultural Level Influence of Parents in Guidance
	Role of Teachers in Guidance	Influence of Language Teachers in the Classroom on Choices Collegial Action by Teachers
	Peer Influence in Guidance	Influence of Peers/Siblings in Guidance Influence of Peers/Siblings in Guidance (Negative Evaluation of Students? Lack of Courage? Or Too Young and Insufficiently Supported?)
	Activities of the Guidance Representative Teacher	Meetings and Support Desks with Parents for Open Day Registration

	Classroom Interventions and Orientation – Stimulating Student Thinking
	Interaction with Students for Guidance
	Information Gathering and Matching
Guidance Council	Criteria for Assignment and Selection of School Choices
	Mismatch Between Interests and Skills in School Choice
	Consequences of Mismatch Between Choice and Guidance Advice
Guidance Activities	Orientation Meetings in the Second Year Visits and Laboratory Activities for Orientation Distribution and Explanation of the High School Guidance Booklet Orientation Fair Registration Procedure for High Schools and Participation in Open Days, Influence of High Schools on the Choice
Digital Tools and Online Management for Guidance	Managing Classroom and Online Guidance Access to Online Materials
Guidance for Students with Linguistic Difficulties	Guidance for Students with Linguistic Difficulties School Choice for Students with Linguistic Difficulties
Re-Orientation	Re-orientation and Possible Modifications of the Choice Re-orientation and Consequences
Orientation Support	Guidance support-Support for Families Facing Linguistic or Systemic Challenges Guidance support-Support for Students and Parents for Open Days
Prospettive E Aspettative Nell'orientamento	Influence of Family Expectations on School Choice Parents' Methods and Criteria in School Choices

Perspectives on the Choices of Students
and Parents

Socioeconomic Expectations: Limited
Ability to Improve Conditions and
Difficulties in Planning the Future

Note: Macro-Categories ($N = 2$), Categories ($N = 12$), Labels ($N = 43$).

CHAPTER 5

5.EXPLORING FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC OUTCOMES AND TRACK CHOICES AMONG IMMIGRANT ADOLESCENTS: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY IN VERONA

5.1 Background

Whereas the literature from Western countries generally shows that students from immigrant backgrounds are advantaged in terms of academic track choices (Heath et al. 2008), in Italy there seems to be a significant disadvantage for immigrant students in track choices on the transition to higher secondary school (Azzolini & Barone 2013; Barban & White, 2011). Indeed, according to the statistics from the Ministry of Education from 2000 to 2021, Italy has recorded a significant difference between Italian and non-Italian students in terms of academic progress. Delays in study, under-performance, lower chance of school attainment, drop-outs, and lower track choices are common issues among migrant students (MIUR, 2021). Additionally, according to Mantovani (2008), these students are significantly disadvantaged in academic outcomes.

5.2 Socio Economic and Socio-cultural Factors and Student's Achievement

5.2.1 Socio-Economic Status and Student's Achievement

Achievement gap research has frequently examined the effects of socioeconomic factors on student's academic progress (e.g., Kihara, 2022; Kiang et al., 2013; Lenkeit et al., 2018; Lorenz et al., 2020; Obinna & Ohanian, 2020). The impact of family social background and socioeconomic resources on students' school achievement is well-documented in the literature (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Chiu & Xihua, 2008; Crosnoe, 2009). Moreover, students from low SES backgrounds generally achieve the lowest grades (Magnuson & Duncan, 2006).

Migrants have substantial disadvantages in securing skilled employment, which reflect broader economic challenges (Kogan, 2018; Reyneri & Fullin, 2011). National reports, such as those from IDOS (2022) and ISTAT (2022), indicate that the economic status of immigrants in Italy is notably poor. According to these documents, over 60% of foreign workers are employed in unskilled

professions, with a significant mismatch between their qualifications and jobs. Furthermore, the unemployment rate among immigrants stands at 9.3%, nearly double that of Italians at 4.7%. Agriculture employs 13.4% of foreign workers, while a staggering 65.9% are engaged in domestic services. Immigrant women are particularly affected, with 42.5% being overqualified for their roles, compared to 25.7% of Italian women. These disparities underscore the substantial economic challenges faced by immigrant families in Italy (ISTAT, 2022a) which likely contribute to poorer academic outcomes for their children.

Poverty-related stressors further hinder the academic performance of the students (Spencer et al. 2001). For instance, Marks (2005), found that socioeconomic background explains much of the difference in reading and math performance between 15-year-old immigrants and non-immigrants across 20 OECD countries. Immigrant families often exhibit lower levels of education, employment in lower-ranking positions, reduced income, and less accumulated wealth compared to native families. The educational outcomes of immigrant students are, to a greater extent, influenced by these socioeconomic factors. Similarly, studies in the United States Schmid (2001) and the Netherlands (Driessen & Dekkers, 1997) showed that lower SES is strongly associated with underperformance among ethnic minority students.

Families with low SES often face both practical constraints, such as financial challenges, and psychological barriers, related to their own and their social networks' beliefs about higher education adaptation. Although research underscores the impact of SES on academic outcomes, it has not adequately examined its influence on academic tracking, particularly in the Italian context. Academic tracking decisions, often linked to socioeconomic resources, can perpetuate inequality by steering immigrant students into less ambitious educational pathways. Furthermore, the difference in SES is expected to explain the gap in school achievement between ethnic majority and immigrant students, this relationship does not fully account for the differences. Additional factors have been found to play a significant role in the development and persistence of the achievement gap. These factors are reviewed in the following sections.

5.2.2 Socio-Cultural Level and Student Achievement

Sociologists widely agree that inequality in educational attainment arises from differences in achievement based on social background (primary effects) and social differences in educational choices independent of achievement (secondary effects) (Boudon, 1974; Erikson & Jonsson,

1996). Track choice is a critical determinant in academic outcomes and particularly in attainment. Track choice results in self-selection, as students from working-class backgrounds are less likely to enroll in academically oriented education compared to their middle-class peers (Jaeger, 2009; Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). The occurrence of secondary effects is well established. More recently, scholars have emphasized the importance of a multidimensional approach that considers the interplay between parents' economic, social, and cultural capital for a deeper understanding of social reproduction in contemporary societies (Savage, 2015).

Cultural capital is a concept that has heavily influenced the sociology of education. Bourdieu and Passeron's concept (1977), *social reproduction* analyzes how cultural reproduction facilitates the social reproduction of class hierarchies and inequalities in both compulsory and post-compulsory education (Archer & Francis, 2006; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu identifies not only economic capital which refers to financial and material assets, but also social or cultural capital. Cultural capital consists of resources accessible through social network membership. Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, as enduring dispositions or ways of thinking and behaving; objective, as cultural goods like books and paintings; and institutionalized, as educational credentials. These forms of capital enable parents to navigate and integrate into a society's educational and cultural institutions. Parents can support their children's education, with Bourdieu asserting that success also requires familiarity with the lifestyle of those with high status (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Educational decision-making relies on access to social, cultural, and economic capital. Cultural capital, such as in-depth knowledge of the educational system, and social capital, such as connections to people who can offer insider information about schools and track differences, are particularly crucial in this context (Reay, 1998; Van Zanten, 2009).

Research also highlights disparities in parent-teacher interactions are strongly influenced by social class. Middle-class parents display higher skill and entitlement during interactions, often securing advantages for their children, while working-class parents are less equipped to navigate these dynamics (Seghers et al., 2021).

Although cultural capital is acknowledged as pivotal in educational inequality, its specific role in academic tracking for immigrant students, rather than academic performance, remains underexplored. This study contributes by examining sociocultural capital, including exposure to cultural resources, and its specific impact on track choice and academic performance.

5.3 Relational and Social Support Factors and Student Achievement

There are various definitions of social support. Social support involves supportive behaviors or the perception of such behaviors from individuals in our close or extended social networks (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Research indicates that social support impacts adolescents' development and school achievement (Domagala-Zysk, 2006; Uchino et al., 1997). Multiple sources of social support influence students' school outcomes, with support from parents, friends, teachers, and classmates being most relevant (Hughes, et al., 2008).

Parental interaction and involvement play crucial roles in students' grades, attitudes, and aspirations toward school (Steinberg, et al., 1996; Woolley et al., 2006). Social support from parents, or family in general, is linked to students' academic performance (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Rueger et al., 2009). Parental expectations and involvement help bridge the educational aspiration gap between different ethnic groups (Goyette & Xie, 1999) and have an influence beyond socioeconomic status (SES) (Trusty et al., 2003). However, if parents do not feel capable of providing information and encouraging their children to pursue higher education, other sources of social support may be particularly beneficial (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Social support from friends is crucial for adolescents' development and school-related outcomes (Berndt & Murphy, 2002). Students often adopt positive learning behaviors, engagement, and attitudes toward school from their friends (Wentzel, 2005). Veronneau and Dishion (2011) found that having school-engaged friends positively influenced 8th-grade school achievement, although this effect was diminished by the influence of friends with problem behaviors. Additionally, Witkow and Fuligni (2011) discovered that peer encouragement was most strongly linked to grades for immigrant students, while parental support was most strongly linked to GPA for ethnic majority students. Educational aspirations are also influenced by peer support for students from low-SES backgrounds (Berzin, 2010) and ethnic minorities in the UK (Strand & Winston, 2008). Additionally, existing literature highlights the importance of peer support in language development and academic success among emergent bilingual students (Carhill-Poza, 2015). Bilingual peers enhance the academic English proficiency of Spanish-speaking immigrant students through social interactions and collaboration on academic tasks. This support surpasses traditional predictors of language acquisition, like age, time in the United States, gender, and maternal education. This support extends beyond traditional predictors of language acquisition, such as age, time in the

United States, gender, and maternal education. In an ecological framework, school environments impact language acquisition both directly, such as through the curriculum, and indirectly by shaping peer group formation. (Suárez–Orozco et al., 2010).

Supportive relations with teachers and peers can improve the school climate for immigrant students by promoting academic motivation and a feeling of belonging (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Research on social support consistently demonstrates the impact of teachers' perceived support on student outcomes. Multiple studies have shown that perceptions of supportive teachers significantly predict the motivation and academic achievement of young adolescents (Felner et al., 1985; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Wentzel (1996) argues that when examining the combined influence of perceived support from parents, peers, and teachers, it is the perceived support from teachers that directly correlates with students' interest in school. This highlights the crucial role that teachers' perceived support plays in shaping students' educational engagement and success. Teachers who demonstrate care are characterized by their democratic interaction styles, individualized expectations, positive and caring attitude toward their work, and constructive feedback (Wentzel, 1997). Also, Students who have positive relationships with their teachers experience protection against academic underperformance, as these relationships foster a sense of school belonging and motivation for schoolwork (Goodenow, 1993). Baysu and Phalet (2012) showed the impact of perceived teacher support as a general protective factor for school attainment and lower dropout risks. When the student feels understood, they can experience support and when they feel treated unfairly, they perceive rejection (McGrath & Bergen, 2015). Baysu and Phalet (2021) found that teacher-student relationships varied among Belgian-majority and Turkish/Moroccan-minority adolescents. Normative-positive trajectories (high support, low rejection) benefited both groups, while increasing-negative trajectories (moderate support, low-increasing rejection) were observed for minority students. Normative-positive trajectories were linked to improved school outcomes, especially for minority students.

Perceived teacher support is known from research in educational psychology as a generic protective factor that promotes sustained academic engagement and performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Additionally, from an identity safety perspective in social psychology, intergroup friendships play a vital role in fostering school engagement, particularly for minority students (Shook & Fazio, 2008).

Teachers' attitudes and treatment of minority students, which reflect institutional support for diversity and intergroup contact, significantly influence minority students' sense of school belonging (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Perceived support from teachers is particularly crucial in predominantly nonminority environments, where minority students may face challenges in developing a strong sense of belonging (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Strong connections with peers and teachers play a crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive school environment. These relationships are essential for fostering academic motivation, and a sense of belonging, and aiding the journey of marginalized students, including first-generation and those from mixed-status families, in navigating the path to higher education (Stanton-Salazar et al., 2011).

Although many studies have demonstrated the influence of perceived social support from close relationships on students' achievement and aspirations, there is a lack of research examining its effect on track choices. Moreover, few studies have examined the role of perceived social support from close relationships on academic outcomes, and even fewer have considered this relationship in the context of immigrant students' academic achievement. This study focuses specifically on the school context of Italy, investigating how perceived social support impacts academic track choices and performance among adolescent students with a migrant background.

5.4 Individual Difference Factors and Student Achievement

5.4.1 Exploration and Resolution of Ethnic Cultural Identity and Academic Achievement

During Erikson's stage "identity versus role confusion", individuals are increasingly engaged more autonomously in interactions with peers and the external environment. Failure at this stage can have a negative impact on the ability to build close relationships or can lead to difficulties in defining personal goals, values, and future aspirations.

Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is a significant aspect of one's sense of self, encompassing the feeling of belonging and connection to one's ethnic community (Phinney, 1989). Like the development of a broader sense of identity, the formation of ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is crucial during adolescence for both ethnic minority and immigrant youth, as well as for youth in the majority (Musso et al., 2018; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Adolescents who possess a more integrated

understanding of their identity tend to report enhanced psychological well-being and academic adaptation (Crocetti, 2017). ERI stands out as a crucial aspect of adolescent identity development, encompassing their beliefs and perceptions about their ethnic-racial background and the ongoing process of exploring these aspects (Umaña-Taylor et al., 201). Aligned with Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, the developmental stages of ERI include exploration (e.g., learning about traditions and history) and resolution (e.g., achieving clarity). Encouraging exploration and resolution of ERI holds significant preventive value. Adolescents who engage in this process and attain clarity about their ERI typically exhibit elevated self-esteem, reduced mental health issues, and improved academic adjustment (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). In ethnic minority adolescents, engaging in exploration of ERI correlates with reduced depressive symptoms and enhanced self-esteem. Additionally, both exploration and resolution of ERI are linked to increased levels of academic engagement and achievement (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

Moreover, research showed that increased exploration was associated with enhanced intercultural competence among German majority youth (Schwarzenthal et al., 2017). Additionally, in both minority and majority youth, ERI was correlated with improved global identity cohesion, academic grades, and self-esteem, along with reduced depressive symptoms (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018).

The study by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017) on the Identity Project (IP) program demonstrated the positive effects of identity exploration and resolution in adolescents. The IP program aims to help adolescents develop their ERI and create a classroom environment that values diversity and tolerance. According to Schachner and colleagues, this collaborative method of identity development holds particular importance in multicultural environments such as schools, playing a crucial role in the acculturation of immigrant youth (Schachner et al., 2016). As explained in Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2016), the intervention was expected to produce increases in ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution, which in turn were expected to increase adolescents' global identity cohesion, underscoring a cascading nature of associations in the development of identity domains (i.e., initiation of one process leads to initiation of another). The benefits of global identity cohesion were expected to extend to other indices of psychosocial functioning such as higher self-esteem, lower depressive symptoms, greater academic engagement, higher grades, and more positive other group orientation (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2016).

The conceptual model of intervention proposed in this study aligns with findings from previous research that highlight the significance of ERI exploration and resolution in adolescents. Studies

conducted with diverse samples, including Latino (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015), African American (e.g., Seaton et al., 2006), Asian American (e.g., Le et al., 2009), Native American/American Indian (e.g., Kenyon & Carter, 2011), and European American (e.g., Yasui et al., 2004) adolescents, consistently show that greater engagement in ERI exploration and the development of a clearer sense of identity is associated with better psychosocial adjustment.

This conceptual model is rooted in developmental theory, drawing on the idea that achieving a clear sense of one's identity (resolution) through meaningful exploration provides adolescents a profound sense of inner identity. As Erikson (1968) suggests, this process allows individuals to comprehend who they were, who they are, and who they can become, creating a cohesive understanding of their interconnected identities.

The studies described above were all performed among ethnic minority and immigrant students at middle school, showing positive effects on achievement. However, it is unclear to what extent such results would generalize to countries outside the US and specifically to the context of Italy. For example, Italy has significant differences compared to the United States and Germany when it comes to multicultural policies, the ethnic composition of its population, and the relationships between the majority and minority groups (Musso et al., 2018). In Italy, there has been limited research on interventions aimed at promoting identity exploration and resolution among immigrant students. To date, only one adaptation of the Identity Project intervention has been implemented, but there is a lack of evidence regarding its impact on academic progress.

The present study, however, does not aim to replicate this intervention. Instead, it seeks to address the gap in the literature by investigating the relationship between identity exploration, identity resolution, and academic performance, as well as academic tracking, among migrant students in Italy through a correlational analysis.

5.4.2 Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Self-esteem is an individual's overall assessment of their own worth, which can be either positive or negative. It is a crucial aspect of self-concept, which Rosenberg (1965) describes as the entirety of a person's thoughts and feelings about themselves as an object. In addition to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-identification are important components of self-concept. In adults, self-esteem tends to be relatively stable and is not easily influenced by the conditions of a research study (Coopersmith, 1965). Throughout various stages of development, children gradually become

aware of different aspects of themselves. Initially, they recognize their physical abilities and talents, such as motor skills, artistic capabilities, and performance abilities. Adolescence marks a significant transition from childhood to adulthood within a given cultural context. During this critical period, self-esteem plays a particularly influential role in shaping development and identity (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Self-esteem is a significant factor influencing various aspects of human behavior, such as general adjustment, anxiety levels, acceptance of others, and child-rearing practices (Gill, 2004).

Individuals with high self-esteem are believed to display traits such as confidence, happiness, strong motivation, and a positive attitude toward success. In education, the importance of self-esteem is paramount. Numerous studies have shown a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Coopersmith, 1967; Covington, 1989; Holly, 1987; Purky, 1970; Scheirer & Krant, 1979; Reasoner, 2005; Reynolds, 1988; Walz & Bleuer, 1992; Wylie, 1979). The impact of self-esteem on school performance has been studied extensively (Baumeister et al., 2003). Some studies indicate that high self-esteem does not have a positive effect on school performance (Minev et al., 2018). The results do not support the view that self-esteem has a strong causal effect on school achievement. Most evidence indicates that self-esteem has no impact on future academic achievement. The few studies suggesting a positive causal effect on self-esteem generally found only minor effects. Some findings even weakly suggest that high or artificially boosted self-esteem may negatively affect subsequent performance. A study indicated that inflated self-esteem could result in poorer school performance. Theoretically, it was initially believed that self-esteem could enhance academic effort and persistence. Early research supported this notion, with positive and significant correlations often observed between self-esteem and academic performance, as noted by Wylie (1979). Further investigations revealed that these correlations may not be directly because of self-esteem. Instead, good grades might make people feel better about themselves, rather than the other way around. Additionally, when considering other factors in statistical analysis, the impact of self-esteem on academic success significantly decreases (Baumeister et al., 2003).

However, the research by Coopersmith (1959) investigated the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance while considering factors like socioeconomic status and intelligence. The findings indicated strong and statistically significant links between self-esteem and academic achievement, highlighting self-esteem's influence on academic outcomes despite adjusting for

other variables. The study involved 102 fifth- and sixth-grade children from public schools in a small Eastern city, revealing significant correlations between self-esteem and both achievement and sociometric choice. Even after controlling for these factors, self-esteem remained independently associated with academic performance. Additionally, discrepancies between self-evaluations and observer ratings were explored, with most cases showing substantial agreement. However, significant differences were found across various variables except for the manifest anxiety and ideal self indices when comparing groups with the greatest positive and negative differences.

Also, Primavera et al. (1974) examined the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem in 180 fifth- and sixth-grade students from a Catholic school in a middle-class neighborhood. The results showed a significant correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement for the entire group. Notably, this correlation was significant for both the total group and females. However, among males, only the correlation between self-esteem and the N.Y. State Mathematics test reached significance. The study did not find significant differences in these correlations between males and females.

Additionally, Vishalakshi and Yeshodhara (2012) examined the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement among ninth-grade students in Mysore City. They collected data from 321 students attending both government and private schools. Using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) to measure self-esteem and total scores from second-semester exams for academic achievement, the study found a positive relationship between self-esteem and academic performance among secondary school students. Thus, as self-esteem increases, academic achievement also increases linearly and symmetrically.

In conclusion, self-esteem plays a crucial role in identity formation and motivation, as supported by empirical evidence indicating its positive correlation with academic achievement, particularly during adolescence. While some research has explored causal effects between self-esteem and academic performance, such studies remain limited to the correlation between them. Nevertheless, previous research consistently emphasizes the significance of self-esteem in understanding academic dynamics and achievement. Notably, there is a lack of literature examining the causal relationship between self-esteem and tracking. Existing studies focus on the impact of tracking on self-esteem, such as Kelly (1975), or variations in self-esteem levels among students in different tracks, as observed by Houtte et al. (2012).

5.5 The Present Study

This study seeks to address specific gaps in the existing literature concerning the academic outcomes of immigrant students in Italy. Existing research on the academic outcomes of immigrant students has extensively highlighted disparities compared to their native peers, yet significant gaps remain in understanding the underlying predictors within the Italian context. Most studies have focused on either socioeconomic factors or broad measures of academic performance, but the literature lacks exploration of the links between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic tracking. Additionally, studies have often emphasized socioeconomic status while neglecting the role of sociocultural factors, such as cultural consumption, in shaping students' educational outcomes. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to relational factors and how perceived support from primary social relationships influences academic outcomes, particularly among immigrant students. Finally, there is a gap in the literature regarding the role of individual factors, such as ethnic-cultural identity exploration and resolution, and self-esteem, in academic success and tracking.

Specifically, the research aims to explore the predictive capacity of three distinct groups of variables delineated in the literature review. These groups encompass socioeconomic and sociocultural factors, operationalized as SES variables, identity exploration and resolution pertaining to ethnic-cultural identity, and self-esteem as individual difference factors. Additionally, the study delves into relational factors, including perceived support from parents, peers, and teachers. By examining these variables, the research seeks to elucidate their influence on the academic trajectories of immigrant students within the Italian educational context. By analyzing these variables collectively, the research intends to provide a more holistic understanding of their influence on the academic trajectories of immigrant students within the Italian educational context. Through this approach, the research seeks to determine which types of predictors—whether socioeconomic, individual, or relational—play a more significant role in shaping the academic outcomes of immigrant students, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how to address academic disparities in this population.

As outlined in the initial chapter, academic achievement indicators, namely academic performance and academic track choice, were examined. These dependent variables were selected because they represent critical aspects of educational outcomes that can significantly influence students' future

opportunities and success. Academic performance is a widely studied indicator, providing a direct measure of students' success in the educational system. On the other hand, academic track choice is equally important but has received less attention in the literature, particularly concerning immigrant students. Track choice plays an important role in shaping students' educational trajectories, often determining their access to higher education and professional opportunities. By examining both academic performance and track choice, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence these crucial educational outcomes, particularly for immigrant students in Italy.

To achieve the research goals, a correlational study design was employed. Data for this study were collected from lower secondary schools in Verona, a city located in the Northern Italy's Veneto region.

5.5.1 Hypotheses and Research Questions

- ***Hypothesis 1: Academic Disparities Between Native and Students with Immigrant Background***

Building upon previous literature highlighting the academic disadvantages faced by immigrant students in Italy (Azzolini & Barone, 2013; MIUR, 2021), it is hypothesized that there exists a significant difference between native Italian students and students with immigrant background in terms of their academic outcomes with students from immigrant backgrounds expected to exhibit lower academic performance and be more likely to choose lower and less university-oriented academic tracks compared to their native Italian peers. This hypothesis addresses the disparities in academic performance and track choices among immigrant students in the Italian education system as outcomes.

- ***Hypothesis 2: Predictive Role of SES Variables in Academic Outcomes***

Given the documented influence of socioeconomic factors on academic achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Magnuson & Duncan, 2006; Spencer et al., 2001), it is hypothesized that SES variables will be positively associated with better academic outcomes among both native and immigrant students in Italy. However, due to the typically lower SES of immigrant students compared to their native counterparts, this association is expected to contribute to the observed academic performance gap between these groups.

- ***Hypothesis 3: Predictive Role of Individual Differences in Academic Outcomes***

Building upon previous research highlighting the influence of identity and self-esteem on academic achievement (Coopersmith, 1959; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018), it is hypothesized that higher levels of identity exploration, identity resolution and self-esteem will be positively associated to better academic outcomes among immigrant students in Italy. This hypothesis addresses the psychological factors shaping immigrant students' academic performance and academic track choices in the Italian education system.

• ***Hypothesis 4: Predictive Role of Relational Support in Academic Outcomes***

Considering the importance of social support networks in academic success, engagement and performance (Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Goodenow, 1993; Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), it is hypothesized that relational support from parents, peers, and teachers is expected to be positively associated with better academic outcomes among immigrant students in Italy. This hypothesis aimed to explore the association between supportive relationships and academic performance and track choices among immigrant youth in Italian education system.

5.6 Method and Procedure

5.6.1 Sample

To recruit participants, 19 public lower secondary schools in Verona, identified based on the available data at the time, were contacted. The data were collected in November 2024, during the orientation period, typically before the students in Italian schools engage in academic track choices. School principals and teachers were briefed on the research objectives and methods. Seven schools agreed to participate in the study. Upon receiving consent from the school directors, consent forms and parental questionnaires were distributed through the schools to the parents.

The parent questionnaire was sent in a sealed envelope along with the consent form, ensuring data collection was conducted in compliance with privacy and ethical considerations and maintaining confidentiality.

Participants were students whose parents or legal guardians provided informed consent and completed the required parents' questionnaire. Recruitment was conducted on a voluntary basis. An information sheet detailing the research aims, procedures, potential risks and benefits, data handling, and retention was provided to parents and legal guardians. They were requested to sign and return the informed consent sheet.

The questionnaire for students was administered during class time. The researcher and the trained collaborators provided students with information about the study and requested their cooperation. A total of 700 consent forms was sent to the families. After excluding incomplete consents, the final sample of students consisted of 368 students both native and non-native individuals. The sample included a near- equal number of female (53.7%) and male (46.3%) students with an average age 12.7 years ($SD = 0.611$). The majority of students were in the 3rd grade (59.2%). Further sociodemographic details are provided in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 *Sociodemographic Characteristics of Students*

Students' Characteristics	<i>Missing</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Gender	1	367					
Female		197	53.7				
Male		170	46.3				
Age							
	3	365		12.7	0.611	11	16
School grade	3	365					
2 nd grade		149	40.8				
3 rd grade		216	59.2				
Student's declared nationality	0	368					
Italian		344	93.5				
Other nationalities		24	6.5				
Student's Background	17	351					
Italian or mixed background		269	76.6				
Both parents with immigrant background		82	23.4				

The study included a total of 368 parents and 368 students, ensuring an equal number of each group., with a balanced gender distribution among parents: 184 female parents (50.0%) and 184 males (50.0%).

To analyze the data effectively, we recoded responses based on the inferred biological sex of the parents, as the original questionnaire did not explicitly label them as mothers or fathers. Fathers had an average age of 48.7 years ($SD = 5.93$), while mothers averaged 45.6 years ($SD = 5.54$). The range of ages for fathers was 31 to 70 years, and for mothers, 30 to 62 years. In terms of education, 47.9% of mothers had completed high school, and 34.8% held a university degree. A smaller proportion of mothers had no education, completed primary or middle school, or obtained postgraduate qualifications.

For fathers 51.6%, had completed high school and 28.0%, had a university degree. Fewer had no education, completed primary or middle school or pursued postgraduate education. More sociodemographic details are provided in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 *Sociodemographic Characteristics of Parents*

Parents' Characteristics	<i>Missing</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Gender							
Female	0	184	50.0		0.50		
Male	16	184	50.0		0.50		
Age							
Father	23	345		48.7	5.93	31	70
Mother	8	360		45.6	5.54	30	62
Parents' nationality							
Mother							
Italian		255	70.1				
Migration background		109	29.9				
Father							

Italian	255	72.2
Migration background	98	27.8

Educational level

Mother's Educational level	9	359		
No Education		5	1.4	
Primary school		1	0.3	
Middle School		38	10.6	
High school		172	47.9	
University		125	34.8	
Post-graduate		18	5.0	
Father's Educational level	25	343		
No education		5	1.5	
Primary school		4	1.2	
Middle School		54	15.7	
High school		177	51.6	
University		96	28.0	
Postgraduate		7	2.0	

Family's Cultural consumption

Cultural consumption (overall)	12	356	3.21	0.58
Cinema	7	361	2.36	0.78
Books	8	360	3.37	1.03
Events	4	364	2.69	0.86
Music	4	364	4.43	0.69

Family's Income level

	136	232		
0 - 15,000 Euro		47	20.3	
15,001-28,000 Euro		55	23.7	
28,001 - 55,000 Euro		82	35.3	
55,001- 75,000 Euro		22	9.5	
Over 75.001 Euro		26	11.2	

Note: $N = 368$. For the cultural consumption items, the response scale ranged between 1 (“Never”) and 5 (“Every day”).

A variable was created to classify students based on the country of birth of their parents. Students were coded into two groups: one group consisted of those with at least one Italian parent ($n = 269$, representing 76.6), and the other group included those with both parents being non-Italian ($n = 82$, $M = 23.4$).

The majority of mothers (70.1%, $n = 255$) and fathers (72.2%, $n = 255$) were Italian, while 29.9% of mothers ($n = 109$) and 27.8% of fathers ($n = 98$) were non-Italian. Table 5.2 reports the sociodemographic characteristics of parents.

The majority of mothers (70.1%, $n = 255$) and fathers (72.2%, $n = 255$) were Italian, while 29.9% of mothers ($n = 109$) and ($n = 98$) were non-Italian. For detailed sociodemographic characteristics, refer to Table 5.2.

Based on self-reported nationality, 93.5% ($n = 344$) of students identified as Italian, while 6.5% ($n = 24$) reported a non-Italian nationality. Among those who identified as non-Italian the most common country of origin was Sri Lanka (30.4%, $n = 7$). Other notable countries of origin included Moldavia (17.4%, $n = 4$) and Ukraine (13.0%, $n = 3$). Smaller proportions came from Romania, Albania, Morocco, China, India, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Bangladesh, and Greece, each accounting for 4.3% or less of the sample. For further details, see Table 5.15 in the Appendix.

Table 5.3 *Scale reliabilities and descriptive statistics*

Scale	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω	M	SD
Cultural level scale	.57	.59	3.46	0.50
Cultural level (item dropped)	.62	.63	3.21	0.58
Education father	-	-	4.10	0.83
Education mother	-	-	4.29	0.84
Identity exploration	.69	.71	3.18	1.19
Identity resolution	.82	.83	4.19	1.10
Self-esteem	.87	.88	4.05	0.97
PTS	.79	.79	3.51	0.99

PPAS	.85	.86	3.99	0.91
PPES	.89	.89	3.67	0.90

Note: Note: $N = 368$, At least one Italian parent $n = 269$ for subjects with Both parents non-Italian $n=82$ for group with both parents with migrant background.

PTS= Perceived Teacher Support, PPAS= Perceived Parent's Support, PPS= Perceived Peers Support.

5.6.2 Measures

In this research, we utilized two surveys: one for adolescents and another for parents. These surveys were specifically designed for this study, incorporating a combination of validated measures from peer-reviewed academic publications and scales that were developed ad hoc in prior research. They included measures of demographic factors and control variables.

The scales included in analysis from *student questionnaire* includes scales and items to collect data about the adolescent's age, gender, school grade, ethnic origin. This questionnaire consisted of scales to measure individual difference variables such as self-esteem, identity exploration, identity resolution, as well as relational variables including perceived support from teachers, parents and peers. The scales also measured outcome variables that is academic performance, and track choices.

The *parent questionnaire* four items include the demographic information about both parents. The items of this instrument assess sociological factors related to the achievement gap and primarily focus on family socioeconomic status and sociocultural level. The scales included in the analysis comprised Age gender, ethnic origin of each parent as well as their educational level. Also, family income and family cultural consumption were considered in the analysis.

The student questionnaires have both male and female versions and take approximately 10 minutes for the parent survey and 20 minutes for the adolescent questionnaire. All items in the parents' questionnaire were designed on a five-level Likert scale, while items in the student questionnaire were measured on a six-level scale. All reliability analyses are presented in Table 5.3.

5.6.2.1 SES Variables

- *Socioeconomic Status*

Family Income. The parents' survey included a variable on socioeconomic status, specifically family income. Family income included an item concerning the annual family income, structured as a five-point response scale, ranging from the lowest to the highest income according to the

Italian budget law (legge di bilancio 2022), with an additional option for *"I don't know/I prefer not to answer."* The distribution of family income levels among the participants reveals a range of economic backgrounds. A majority of participants reported a family income between 15,001 and 55,000 Euros, with the largest group (35.3%) in the 28,001 to 55,000 Euros bracket. Smaller proportions fell below or above this range, with 20.3% earning less than 15,000 Euros and 11.2% earning over 75,000 Euros. Data reported in Table 5-2 which includes data on gender, age, nationality, educational level, cultural consumption, and family income.

- ***Sociocultural Level***

Family Cultural Consumption. A five-item scale in parents' survey is employed to gauge the frequency of cultural consumption, assessing the frequency of engagement with cultural products across five domains: Overall cultural consumption, cinema, books, events, and music. Participants answered on a five-point response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*everyday*) (Meraviglia, 2018). After calculating the reliability of the scale, the item related to personal computer usage was identified as poorly correlated with other items and the total score, and it was subsequently removed. This adjustment led to a slight improvement in the scale's reliability, with Cronbach's α increasing from 0.57 to 0.62, and McDonald's ω from 0.59 to 0.63.

Parental Education Level. This measure is often considered an indicator of the socioeconomic status (SES) of a family in the literature, along with factors such as family income or parents' employment (e.g., Obinna & Ohanian, 2020; Verhaeghe et al., 2018). Conversely, some researchers consider parents' education as an indicator of a student's cultural capital (e.g., Di Bartolomeo, 2011; Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011). The parents' questionnaire in this study included an item from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey (Dollmann & Jacob, 2016) that assesses each parent's educational level.

5.6.2.2 Individual Difference Variables

- ***Identity Exploration and Resolution***

The short version of the scale developed by Douglass and Umaña-Taylor (2015) was used in students' questionnaire to assess the exploration and resolution of ethnic cultural identity. The Italian adaptation of this instrument was developed by Ceccon and colleagues (2023). Three items

were employed to measure identity exploration. These items were: "I have attended events that have allowed me to learn more about my original culture.", "I have read books/newspapers/magazines or sought information through other materials from which I have learned more about my original culture.", "I have participated in activities that have taught me something about my original culture.". Three items focus on identity resolution. These items are: "I understood what my culture means to me.", "I have been aware of what my culture means to me.", "I know what my original culture means to me.". These items are as follows: "I have negative feelings toward my culture. ", "I have wished to be part of another culture.", "I have thought that I do not like my original culture.". The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*always*). Identity exploration, showed good internal consistency, Cronbach's α of .69, and McDonald's ω of .71. Detailed reliability statistics are reported in Table 5.3.

- **Self-Esteem**

The ten-item scale from Rosenberg (1979) was used to examine self-esteem. The translation of this scale in Italian was used in a study by Shamloo and colleagues (2023). The items of this scale were included in students' questionnaire. Examples of items include: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.", "At times I think I am no good at all.", "I feel that I have a number of good qualities.". The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). Due to a printing problem, one item (item 4) was omitted from the questionnaire. This item was: "I am able to do things as well as most other people." The self-esteem scale exhibited high internal consistency. Detailed reliability statistics are available in Table 5.3.

5.6.2.3 Relational Variables

- ***Perceived Parent's and Peers' Support***

For parental and peer support, two scales measuring the frequency of support from the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki & Demary, 2002) were employed. Level 2 of this instrument is suitable for use with children from 6th to 12th grade in middle or high schools (Malecki & Demary, 2002). Ten items assessed perceived parental support, and ten items measured support from classmates. Students were required to respond to statements such as, "My parent(s) help me make decisions." The items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from

(*never*) to (*always*). Both Perceived Parent Support (PPAS) and Perceived Peers Support (PPES) demonstrated good internal consistency. For detailed reliability statistics, see Table 5.3.

- ***Perceived Teacher's Support***

To assess the frequency of perceived support from teachers, a 4-item scale adapted from Cook et al. (1995) was utilized. Sample items included, "How often do you perceive that your teachers provide you with the assistance you require?" and "*How often do your teachers encourage you in school?*". Students answered these items on a 6-point Likert scale with responses ranging from (*never*) to (*always*). Perceived Teacher Support (PTS) showed moderate internal consistency, with Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω both at 0.79.

5.6.2.4 Dependent Variables

We employed four items to measure the probability of choosing a field of study by the student: high schools, technical institutes, vocational institutes. This measure was used previously by Azzolini and Ress (2015). We also assessed with the same four items the probability that the school recommends each of the four types of school.

Finally, as a measure of performance we asked the students to report their most recent grade in mathematics and Italian, as well as the final grades mathematics and Italian attained at the end of the previous school year.

5.6.3 Analytical Approach

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 21). As a preliminary step to test Hypothesis 1 (H_1) we conducted an independent samples t -test.

To explore the research questions regarding the correlation between SES variables (H_2), individual difference variables (H_3), and relational variables (H_4), a pairwise correlational matrix was generated.

Additionally, to understand the predictive power of each variable, hierarchical regressions were carried out. This analytical approach aims to comprehend how sociological, relational, and individual factors are associated with participants' academic outcomes, specifically we entered group status (Italian vs. non-Italian) as a predictor of each academic outcome (students' track choice, school recommendation of track, most recent grades in mathematics and Italian, final grade in mathematics and Italian, for a total of 6 dependent variables) in the first step. In the second step,

we entered the sociological variables, the relational variables, or the individual variables as additional predictors. The three groups of factors were entered in three distinct models. Overall, we tested 18 regression models.

5.7 Results

5.7.1 Testing the Academic Disparities Between Native and Students with Immigrant Background

Table 5.4 illustrates the outcomes of *t*-tests comparing students with at least one Italian parent to those with both parents non-Italian across various academic indicators. The analysis showed that while there are no significant differences between the two groups regarding Lyceum and Technical choices, a *t* significant difference is noted in student's choice of vocational school with students of non-Italian parents being more likely to choosing for these tracks.

In terms of recommended tracks, no significant differences were found for Lyceum and Technical tracks, however there was a trend towards significance favoring students with at least one Italian parent for Lyceum suggesting that students with at least one Italian parent may be more likely to be recommended for Lyceum. Conversely, students with both parents non-Italian were more likely to be recommended for Vocational tracks, displaying a significant difference.

Examining academic performance, students with at least one Italian parent consistently outperformed those with both non-Italian parents in Math and Italian scores, as well as Math and Italian GPA, significant differences were observed across the measure. In each case, students with at least one Italian parent outperformed those with both parents non-Italian.

To better capture the diversity of student backgrounds, two classification approaches were used. Coding Group 1 treated students with both Italian parents and mixed-parentage students as a single group, comparing them to students with both non-Italian parents. Coding Group 2 distinguished students from mixed-parentage families, placing them in the same category as those with non-Italian parents, contrasting both with students from fully Italian backgrounds. In this chapter, we present the analysis for Coding Group 1, as the number of students with an immigrant background made this grouping more realistic for meaningful statistical analysis. However, for completeness, the results of the *t*-tests for Coding Group 2 are provided in the appendix in table 5.17.

Table 5.4 Results of *t*-tests for independent groups

	Italian or mixed background		Both parents with immigrant background		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Student's choice							
Lyceum choice	4.42	1.75	4.10	1.80	1.42	337	.158
Technical choice	3.45	1.59	3.61	1.56	-0.71	333	.476
Vocational choice	2.46	1.50	2.81	1.62	-1.68	333	.093
Recommended-Track							
Lyceum track	4.25	1.59	3.83	1.89	1.91	333	.058
Technical track	3.50	1.50	3.45	1.52	0.26	330	.796
Vocational track	2.62	1.45	3.15	1.68	-2.66	330	.008
Last Score							
Math score	7.53	1.58	6.85	1.67	3.19	327	.002
Italian score	7.82	1.23	7.23	1.37	3.45	322	<.001
GPA last year							
Math GPA	7.80	1.35	6.92	1.43	4.70	319	<.001
Italian GPA	7.83	0.95	7.16	1.05	5.07	320	<.001

Note: $N = 368$, At least one Italian parent $n = 269$ for subjects with Both parents non-Italian $n = 82$ for group with both parents with migrant background. Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year

5.7.2 Addressing Relationships Among SES, Individual Differences, Relational Factors, and Academic Outcomes

To examine the relationships between the study variables, we computed Pearson's correlation coefficients to assess the linear relationships between pairs of variables. The sample sizes (N), means (M), and standard deviations (SD) for each variable were reported in table 5.5.

Hierarchical regression analysis was chosen to investigate the predictive power of the independent variables on students' outcomes. Each regression model consisted in two steps, where the first step examined the predictive power of students' background and the second step assessed the effect of each set of variables on student's outcomes. Thus, the second step computed the amount of additional variance in the dependent variables that was explained by the inclusion of each set of independent variables in addition to background. Table 5.6 shows how each regression was performed and illustrates the variables included in step 1 and 2 of each model.

Table 5.6 Regression analysis summary: Models and variables by step

	Model1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8		Model 9	
	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2
Background	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
SES variables																		
Family income		✓		✓		✓												
Cultural consumption		✓		✓		✓												
Father's education		✓		✓		✓												
Mother's education		✓		✓		✓												
Individual difference variables																		
Id-Exploration								✓		✓		✓						
Id-Resolution								✓		✓		✓						
Self-esteem								✓		✓		✓						
Relational variables																		
PTS														✓		✓		✓
PPAS														✓		✓		✓
PPES														✓		✓		✓
Dependent Variables																		
Student's choices	✓	✓					✓	✓					✓	✓				
Recommended track			✓	✓					✓	✓					✓	✓		
Performance					✓	✓					✓	✓					✓	✓

5.7.3 Assessing the Predictive Power of Factors for Students' Academic Outcomes

- **Hypothesis 2: Predictive Role of SES Variables in Academic Outcomes**

Testing Correlations Between SES Variables and Student's Track Choice

The results of the correlational matrix revealed significant relationships between SES variables and the probability of students' track choices. Higher family income was associated with a greater likelihood of choosing a lyceum track and a lower likelihood of choosing technical or vocational tracks. Similarly, Parental education level was positively correlated with lyceum choice (father's education and mother's education) and negatively correlated with the choice of technical institutions and vocational institutions. Lastly, cultural consumption was positively associated with lyceum choice and negatively with vocational choice. Table 5.5 provides more details about bivariate correlations.

Table 5.5 Bivariate correlations

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
1.Income	232	2.68	1.22	–																				
	<i>N</i>			232																				
2. Cultural.Freq	356	3.21	.58	.34***	–																			
	<i>N</i>			.224	356																			
3.Educ.father	343	4.10	.83	.52***	.30***	–																		
	<i>N</i>			.218	.334	343																		
4.Educ.mother	359	4.30	.84	.36***	.36***	.65***	–																	
	<i>N</i>			.228	.351	.341	359																	
5. Id-EXP	348	3.18	1.19	-.10	-.05	-.14*	-.14*	–																
	<i>N</i>			.221	.338	.325	.340	348																
Id-RES	349	5.35	1.00	.06	.05	.10	.07	.06	–															
	<i>N</i>			.220	.339	.327	.341	.341	349															
7.Self-esteem	334	4.09	.99	.04	-.004	.10	.09	.11*	.36***	–														
	<i>N</i>			.214	.324	.313	.326	.326	.326	334														
8.PTS	354	3.51	.99	-.03	-.03	.08	-.01	.11*	.18**	.19***	–													
	<i>N</i>			.225	.344	.332	.346	.340	.342	.330	354													
9.PPAS	335	3.99	.91	.05	.07	-.01	.08	.17**	.21***	.33***	.34***	–												
	<i>N</i>			.213	.325	.314	.329	.325	.324	.314	.331	335												
10.PPES	335	3.67	.90	.07	.08	.05	-.03	.26***	.13*	.27***	.28***	.30***	–											
	<i>N</i>			.218	.326	.313	.327	.326	.327	.319	.330	.316	335											
11.Math score	345	7.39	1.62	.34***	.22***	.29***	.30***	-.02	.03	.21***	.13*	.08	.16**	–										
	<i>N</i>			.219	.335	.322	.337	.333	.331	.321	.338	.322	.21	345										
12.Italian score	340	7.66	1.29	.24***	.26***	.24***	.20***	-.03	.07	.15**	.20***	.15**	.21***	.41***	–									
	<i>N</i>			.217	.330	.317	.332	.329	.328	.317	.333	.316	.316	.334	340									
13.Math GPA	336	7.62	1.42	.37***	.14*	.32***	.32***	-.02	.12*	.25***	.13*	.06	.18**	.77***	.43***	–								
	<i>N</i>			.219	.326	.314	.328	.328	.326	.318	.330	.315	.315	.327	.325	336								
14.Italian GPA	336	7.67	1.00	.33***	.26***	.36***	.28***	-.07	.06	.14*	.15**	.12*	.23***	.49***	.66***	.62***	–							
	<i>N</i>			.218	.326	.315	.328	.327	.326	.317	.330	.314	.316	.326	.323	.334	336							
5.Lyc. choice	354	4.36	1.76	.34***	.28***	.37***	.36***	-.02	.02	.03	.15**	.14*	.16**	.43***	.41***	.45***	.40***	–						
	<i>N</i>			.226	.345	.333	.347	.341	.342	.331	.347	.329	.329	.339	.333	.333	.333	354						
16.Tech.choice	350	3.51	1.59	-.21***	-.07	-.12*	-.13*	.06	-.02	-.01	-.06	-.05	.08	-.13*	-.18**	-.14*	-.14*	-.35***	–					
	<i>N</i>			.223	.341	.328	.342	.337	.336	.327	.343	.325	.325	.337	.331	.329	.330	.347	350					
17.Voc.choice	350	2.51	1.52	-.26***	-.11*	-.22***	-.24***	.04	-.06	-.02	-.01	-.006	-.02	-.32***	-.22***	-.26***	-.23***	-.42***	.11*	–				
	<i>N</i>			.223	.342	.329	.343	.337	.337	.327	.342	.325	.326	.337	.331	.330	.331	.348	.348	350				

18.Lyc. track	350	4.17	1.66	.34***	.26***	.30***	.31***	.04	.05	.12*	.11*	.15**	.20***	.46***	.48***	.51***	.49***	.75***	-.13*	-.39***	_		
	<i>N</i>			224	340	328	342	338	338	328	343	325	326	339	333	332	332	349	345	345	350		
19.Tech.track	347	3.51	1.51	-.13	-.04	-.05	-.12*	.07	.04	.08	-.11*	-.08	.14*	-.08	-.16**	-.06	-.09	-.23***	.72***	.03	-.14**	_	
	<i>N</i>			223	338	327	341	334	334	325	339	321	323	336	331	329	330	346	344	345	345	347	
20.Voc.track	347	2.74	1.51	-.29***	-.22***	-.18***	-.19***	.04	-.05	-.05	.01	-.001	-.12*	-.37***	-.30***	-.39***	-.31***	-.47***	.12*	.68***	-.46***	.08	_
	<i>N</i>			222	338	327	341	334	334	324	339	322	321	336	330	328	328	345	342	344	344	344	347

Note: * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Income= Family income, Cultural.freq= Cultural consumption, Educ.father= Father's education level, Educ.mother= mother's education level, Id-EXP= Identity exploration, Id-RES= Identity resolution, PTS=Perceived Teacher's Support, PPAS= Perceived Parents' Support, PPES= Perceived Peers' Support, Math score= Recent Math Score, Italian score= Recent Italian Score, Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year. Lyc. choice = Probability of student's tracking in Lyceum, Tech. choice= probability of student's tracking in technical Institutions, Voc. choice= Probability of student's tracking in vocational track. Lyc. track= Recommendation of Lyceum, Tech. track= Recommendation of Technical Institutions, Voc. track= Recommendation of Vocational

The Effect of Student's Background and SES Variables on Student's Track Choice

Table 5.7 reports the first regression for students' track choices. In Step 1, results showed that the student's background alone was not significantly associated with the likelihood of choosing any particular track, and the model showed with low R^2 values.

Step 2 included SES variables, enhancing model fit. Significant predictors of student tracking in lyceum included family income ($B = .33, p = .006$), cultural consumption ($B = 0.46, p = .033$), and mother's education level ($B = .37, p = .034$). All these predictors showed a positive association so that the choice of Lyceum increased at higher levels of these variables. In Step 2, background was significantly associated with Lyceum choice, with students with at least one Italian parent being more oriented than students with immigrant parents to choose this type of school. The model explained 23% of the variance.

For student's choice of technical and vocational institutions, family income showed a negative significant association (technical: $B = -.34, p = .003$; vocational: $B = -0.30, p = .007$). The models explained 6% and 12% of the variance, respectively.

Family income was a significant predictor of vocational choice ($B = -0.30, p = .007$) with a negative association, while other SES variables did not show significant effects.

Table 5.7 Regression analysis for student's track choices with student's background and SES variables (model 1),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice			Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE
Background	-.50	.131	.33	.12	.685	.28	.34	.242	.29	.72	.036	.34	-.39	.226	.32	-.35	.275	.32
Family income										.33	.006	.12	-.34	.003	.11	-.30	.007	.11
Cultural level										.46	.033	.22	-.07	.746	.20	.10	.615	.20
Educ. father										.35	.069	.19	.11	.554	.18	-.15	.395	.18
Educ. mother										.37	.034	.18	-.08	.654	.17	-.28	.085	.16
R^2		.01			.001			.007			.23			.06			.12	
F		2.30			0.17			1.38			12.10			2.30			5.28	
df		(1, 206)			(1, 204)			(1, 204)			(5, 206)			(5, 204)			(5, 204)	
p		.131			.685			.242			<.001			.047			<.001	
$R^2 \Delta$											.22			.05			.11	
$F \Delta$											14.40			2.83			6.22	
$df \Delta$											(4, 201)			(4, 199)			(4, 199)	
$p \Delta$											<.001			.026			<.001	

Note: $N = 207$ for lyceum choice, $N = 205$ for technical choice, and $N = 205$ for vocational choice.

Educ father =Father's Education Level, Educ mother = Mother's Education Level, Lyceum choice = Probability of student's tracking in Lyceum, Technical choice= Probability of student's tracking in Technical Institutions, Vocational choice= Probability of student's tracking in vocational track

Testing Correlations Between SES Variables and Recommendation of Tracks

The correlational matrix indicated that the recommendation of lyceum recommendation was positively correlated with SES variables, including family income, cultural consumption, and both parents' educational level. Conversely, these variables were negatively correlated with recommendation for the likelihood of being recommended for vocational and technical tracks. This pattern suggests that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be recommended for academically oriented tracks, whereas those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be more often directed toward vocational tracks. This could highlight potential socioeconomic disparities in educational guidance.

The Effect of Student's Background and SES Variables on School-Recommended Tracks

Table 5.8 reports the regression analysis for school-recommended tracks with the student's background and SES variables. In Step 1 student's background variable showed a negative significant association with student's choices ($B = -.84, p = .008$), but had non-significant effects on technical and vocational tracks. The R^2 values were low, and background alone explained a small portion of the variance: 3% for lyceum, 0.6% for technical, and 1% for vocational tracks.

After the inclusion of the SES variables in Step 2, the student's background was in a negative significant association with the recommendation of the technical tracks; but not for the lyceum track and vocational track. Family income significantly predicted track recommendation. This variable was positively associated with lyceum track and negatively with technical track and vocational track. Mother's education was positively linked with lyceum track ($B = .33, p = .058$) but did not affect technical track and vocational track. Father's education had a nonsignificant association with the recommended tracks. Cultural consumption was negatively associated with the vocational track ($B = .38, p = .051$).

The inclusion of SES variables increased model explanatory power. The model explained 20% of variance ($R^2 = .20$); for the recommendation of the lyceum track and 10.5% of the variance in vocational track ($R^2 = .105$). For the recommendation of technical track, the R^2 value was .043 and the model was not statistically significant.

Table 5.8 Regression analysis for School's recommended track choice with student's background and SES variables (model2),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track			Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	B	p	SE	B	p	SE
Background	-.84	.008	.31	-.29	.279	.27	.47	.089	.28	.17	.608	.34	-.68	.028	.31	-.22	.472	.31
Family income										.24	.040	.18	-.24	.026	.11	-.28	.010	.11
Cultural level										.50	.020	.21	-.21	.277	.1	-.38	.051	.19
Educ. father										.25	.199	.19	.17	.333	.18	-.06	.728	.18
Educ. mother										.33	.058	.17	-.07	.660	.16	-.06	.706	.16
R^2	.03			.006			.01			.20			.043			.105		
F	7.22			1.18			2.91			9.85			1.79			4.62		
df	(1, 204)			(1, 203)			(1, 202)			(5, 204)			(5, 203)			(5, 202)		
p	.008			.279			.089			<.001			.116			.001		
$R^2 \Delta$										.16			.04			.09		
$F\Delta$										10.18			1.94			4.99		
$df\Delta$										(4, 199)			(4, 198)			(4, 197)		
$p\Delta$										<.001			.105			.001		

Note $N = 205$ for lyceum track, $N = 204$, for technical track, $N = 203$ for vocational track.

Cultural level= Cultural Consumption, Educ father= Father's Education Level, Educ mother= Mother's Education Level, Lyceum track= Recommendation of Lyceum, Technical track= Recommendation of Technical Institutions, Vocational track= Recommendation of Vocational Institution.

Testing Correlations Between SES Variables and Academic Performance

The results of the correlational matrix demonstrated that all the SES variables were in significant positive correlation with the performance indicators. Specifically, higher levels of family income and mother's and father's education were consistently associated with better performance in recent math and Italian scores, as well as math and Italian GPA. For instance, family income showed a low to moderate positive correlation with all performance measures, including math and Italian scores and GPA. Cultural consumption level was positively correlated with all academic performance variables, including recent math and Italian scores, as well as math and Italian GPA. These correlations, though modest, consistently indicated that higher cultural engagement is associated with better academic outcomes.

The Effect of Student's Background and SES Variables on Academic Performance

Table 5.9 reports the regression analysis for academic performance with the student's background and SES variables. In Step 1 the student's background was associated with all the performance variables. Specifically, a negative significant association was observed with recent scores in math and Italian and with previous year GPA in Math and Italian.

The model explained 4% of the variance in recent math score, it explained 5% of the variance for Math GPA ($R^2 = .05$), and explained 7% of the variance in Italian GPA ($R^2 = .07$) and the model was significant.

In Step 2 after the inclusion of SES variables, the predictive power of the student's background was lowered. The background showed no significant association with academic performance. Family income was positively associated with math score and math GPA, but not with Italian score ($B = .006, p = .953$) or Italian GPA ($B = .07, p = .318$). Father's education was positively linked with Italian score and with Italian GPA but this variable showed a non-significant association with math score and math GPA. Cultural consumption and mother's education showed no significant effects on performance variables.

The inclusion of the SES variables increased model explanatory power. The R^2 value explained 17% of the variance in Math score, 13% of the variance in Italian score R^2 value was ($R^2 = .13$) and for Math GPA R^2 value showed 19% of the variance.

Table 5.9 Regression analysis for academic performance with student's background and SES variables (model3),

	Step 1												Step 2											
	Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA			Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE
Background	-.85	.005	.30	-.76	.001	.23	-.80	.002	.26	-.67	<.001	.18	.08	.810	.33	-.34	.203	.27	-.08	.769	.29	-.25	.201	.20
Family Income													.29	.014	.12	.006	.953	.10	.29	.004	.10	.07	.318	.07
Cultural level													.34	.095	.21	.36	.037	.17	-.02	.933	.18	.19	.125	.13
Educ. father													.18	.315	.18	.39	.010	.15	.22	.163	.16	.30	.008	.11
Educ. mother													.22	.183	.17	-.11	.418	.14	.24	.098	.15	.04	.727	.10
R^2		.04			.05			.05			.07			.17			.13			.19			.18	
F		8.25			10.50			9.38			14.11			8.01			5.57			8.90			8.59	
df		(1, 198)			(1, 195)			(1, 199)			(1, 199)			(5, 198)			(5, 195)			(5, 199)			(5, 199)	
p		.005			.001			.002			<.001			<.001			<.001			<.001			<.001	
$R^2 \Delta$														.13			.08			.14			.12	
$F \Delta$														7.68			4.17			8.43			6.80	
$df \Delta$														(4, 193)			(4, 190)			(4, 194)			(4, 194)	
$p \Delta$														<.001			.003			<.001			<.001	

Note: $N = 199$ for Math score, $N = 196$ for Italian score, $N = 200$ for Math GPA and $N = 200$ for Italian GPA Cultural level= Cultural Consumption, Educ. Father= Father's Education Level, Educ. Mother= Mother's Education Level, Math score= Recent Math Score, Italian score = Recent Italian Score, Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year

- ***Hypothesis 3: Predictive Role of Individual differences Variables in Academic Outcomes***

Testing Correlations Between Individual Difference Variables and Academic Outcomes

The results of the correlational matrix indicated that self-esteem had a low positive correlation with academic performance, in terms of recent scores and GPA in math and in Italian. Additionally, self-esteem was positively correlated with the recommendation of lyceum. Although these correlations are generally low, they suggest that higher self-esteem is associated with better performance in math and Italian, both in recent scores and GPA. Identity resolution showed only a low positive correlation with GPA in math suggesting that students with clearer or more resolved identities may perform slightly better in math.

The Effect of Student's Background and Individual Differences Variables on Student's Track

Choice

Table 5.10 reports the second regression for each choice by student. In Step 1 student's background showed no significant association with student's track choices. The R^2 values were low, explaining a small portion of the variance in students' track choices, for lyceum choice: R^2 was .004, for technical choice $R^2 = .002$ and for Vocational choice $R^2 = .005$.

Step 2 included additional individual difference variables: identity exploration, identity resolution and self-esteem. Student's background remained a non-significant predictor for all tracks .

Specifically, identity exploration did not significantly impact the likelihood of choosing a lyceum ($B = -.07, p = .425$), technical choice ($B = .10, p = .188$) or vocational ($B = .05, p = .488$). Similarly, identity resolution was not a significant predictor for lyceum, technical track, or vocational track. Self-esteem also showed no significant effects for all tracks: lyceum ($B = .02, p = .862$), technical ($B = .02, p = .848$), and vocational ($B = -.01, p = .904$).

The explanatory power of the models remained low with the inclusion of individual difference variables in step 2. For students' choice of Lyceum, the model explained 0.6% of the variance, for students' choice of technical institutions, step 2 explained 0.9% of the variance, and for students' choice of vocational institutions, 1% of the variance ($R^2 = .01$), was explained by the model.

Table 5.10 Regression analysis for student’s track choices with student’s background and Individual difference variables (model4),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice			Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice		
	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>
Background	-.29	.259	.25	.16	.465	.22	.28	.201	.22	-.25	.327	.26	.11	.630	.23	.23	.290	.22
Id-exploration										-.07	.425	.09	.10	.188	.08	.05	.488	.08
Id- resolution										.01	.927	.12	-.07	.487	.10	-.12	.234	.10
Self-esteem										.02	.862	.11	.02	.848	.10	-.01	.904	.09
<i>R</i> ²	.004			.002			.005			.006			.009			.01		
<i>F</i>	1.28			0.54			1.64			0.48			0.68			0.95		
<i>df</i>	(1, 303)			(1, 300)			(1, 300)			(4, 303)			(4, 300)			(4, 300)		
<i>p</i>	.259			.465			.201			.748			.608			.438		
<i>R</i> ² Δ										.002			.007			.007		
<i>F</i> Δ										0.22			0.73			0.72		
<i>df</i> Δ										(3, 299)			(3, 296)			(3, 296)		
<i>p</i> Δ										.881			.537			.543		

Note: *N* = 304 for lyceum choice, *N* = 301 for technical choice, and *N* = 301 for vocational choice.

Lyceum choice = Probability of student’s tracking in Lyceum, Technical choice= Probability of student’s tracking in Technical Institutions, Vocational choice= Probability of student’s tracking in vocational track.

The Effect of Student's Background and Individual Variables on School's Recommended Track Choice

Table 5.11 reports the regression analysis for school-recommended tracks with student's backgrounds and individual difference variables. In Step 1 student's background was significantly associated with the recommendation for the vocational track ($B = .50, p = .020$), but not with the lyceum track or the technical track. The model for the vocational track explained 2% of the variance. In contrast, the models for the lyceum and technical tracks showed minimal explanatory power with very small R^2 values (lyceum track: $R^2 = .006$; technical track: $R^2 = .001$).

The inclusion of the individual difference variables had a minimal impact on the model. The background variable remained a significant predictor for the vocational track ($B = .47, p = .034$) but not for the other tracks. Self-esteem was significantly associated with the lyceum track ($B = .21, p = .041$) but not with the other tracks. Identity exploration and resolution did not significantly predict track recommendations. Overall, the models showed low explanatory power with R^2 values remaining near 2%.

Table 5.11 Regression analysis for School's recommended track choice with student's background and Individual variables (model5),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track			Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE
Background	-.33	.168	.24	.11	.595	.22	.50	.020	.22	-.34	.157	.24	.09	.697	.22	.47	.034	.22
Id-exploration										.04	.595	.08	.09	.222	.08	.06	.422	.08
Id-resolution										-.07	.499	.11	-.01	.891	.10	-.05	.633	.10
Self-esteem										.21	.041	.10	.13	.160	.09	-.04	.679	.09
R^2	.006			.001			.02			.02			.01			.02		
F	1.91			0.28			5.45			1.65			1.07			1.65		
df	(1, 300)			(1, 298)			(1, 297)			(4, 300)			(4, 298)			(4, 297)		
p	.168			.595			.020			.161			.374			.163		
$R^2 \Delta$										.02			.01			.004		
$F \Delta$										1.56			1.33			.39		
$df \Delta$										(3, 296)			(3, 294)			(3, 293)		
$p \Delta$										.199			.266			.760		

Note: $N = 301$ for lyceum track, $N = 299$ for technical track $N = 298$ for vocational track.

Lyceum track= Recommendation of Lyceum, Technical track= Recommendation of Technical Institutions, Vocational track= Recommendation of Vocational Institution

The Effect of Student's Background and Individual Variables on Academic Performance

Table 5.12 summarizes the regression analysis for academic performance based on the student's background and Individual variables. In Step1 student's background showed a negative significant association with all the performance variables,. The models explained 3-6% of the variance in these outcomes and were all statistically significant.

In Step 2 the inclusion of the individual difference variable slightly improved the models. Student's background remained in a negative significant association with all of performance measures, while self-esteem showed a positive association with both math ($B = .40, p < .001$) and Italian scores ($B = .21, p = .008$) and GPAs. Identity exploration and resolution were not significantly related to academic performance. The models explained 6-11% of the variance and remained significant.

Including individual difference variables improved the explanatory power of the models. The variance explained increased to 8% for math and Italian scores, and to 11% for math GPA. All models remained significant, with math and Italian scores, as well as GPAs, showing strong statistical significance ($p < .001$).

Table 5.12 Regression analysis for academic performance with student's background and individual variables (model6),

	Step 1												Step 2											
	Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA			Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	B	p	SE	B	p	SE	B	p	SE	B	p	SE
Background	-.65	.006	.23	-.54	.003	.18	-.81	<.001	.20	-.60	<.001	.14	-.63	.007	.23	-.53	.004	.18	-.76	<.001	.20	-.57	<.001	.14
Id-exploration													-.02	.799	.08	-.02	.818	.06	-.03	.686	.07	-.04	.432	.05
Id-resolution													.07	.501	.10	.01	.869	.08	.02	.858	.09	-.04	.533	.07
Self-esteem													.40	<.001	.10	.21	.008	.08	.34	<.001	.08	.15	.019	.06
R^2	.03			.03			.05			.06			.08			.06			.11			.08		
F	7.79			8.80			16.49			17.39			6.33			4.39			9.29			5.90		
df	(1, 293)			(1, 291)			(1, 292)			(1, 292)			(4, 293)			(4, 291)			(4, 292)			(4, 292)		
p	.006			.003			<.001			<.001			<.001			.002			<.001			<.001		
$R^2 \Delta$													.06			.03			.06			.02		
$F\Delta$													5.72			2.87			6.57			2.00		
$df\Delta$													(3, 289)			(3, 287)			(3, 288)			(3, 288)		
$p\Delta$													.001			.037			<.001			.114		

Note: $N = 294$ for Math score, $N = 292$ for Italian score, $N = 293$ for Math GPA and $N = 293$ for Italian GPA.

Math score= Recent Math Score, Italian score= Recent Italian Score, , Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year

- ***Hypothesis 4: Predictive Role of Relational Variables in Academic Outcomes***

Testing Correlations Between Relational Variables and Academic Outcomes

The correlation analysis showed that relational variables—perceived teacher’s parent’s and peer’s support—were positively associated with various academic performance indicators.

Perceived teacher’s support exhibited modest positive correlations with all performance variables. Specifically higher levels of perceived teacher’s support were correlated with better performance in both subjects as reflected in recent scores and GPA. Additionally, higher levels of teacher’s support correlated a higher likelihood of choosing and being recommended for academically rigorous tracks like lyceum. The perception of teacher support was negatively correlated with the probability of recommendation for the technical track.

Higher levels of perceived parent’s support were correlated with better performance in Italian, both in recent score and GPA in Italian as well as a greater likelihood of student’s choice of lyceum and being recommended for lyceum.

Perceived peers support showed positive correlations with performance in both Math and Italian. Although the correlation was low, higher perceived peer support was linked to a greater likelihood of choosing the lyceum. Perception of peer support was also correlated with being recommended for the lyceum and technical tracks, while it was negatively correlated with recommendations for vocational tracks. Analysis reported in Table 5.5.

The Effect of Student’s Background and Relational Variables on Student’s Track Choice

Table 5.13 reports the regression analysis for student’s track choices with student’s background and Relational variables. In Step 1 student’s background showed no significant association with student’s track choices. The R^2 values were low, and background explained only a small portion of the variance in track choices, with models not reaching statistical significance.

In Step 2, the inclusion of relational variables had minimal impact. Background remained non-significant across all track choices. Perceived peer support was positively associated with the technical track ($B = .23, p = 0.41$), while perceived parental support was marginally significant for the lyceum track ($B = .23, p = .053$). Perceived teacher’s support wasn’t found to be a predictor of the student’s track choices.

Overall, upon the inclusion of relational variables the model explained 5% of the variance in lyceum choice, making the model significant ($R^2 = .05, p = .004$). However, models for technical and vocational tracks remained non-significant, with low explanatory power.

Table 5.13 Regression analysis for student's track choices with student's background and relational variables (Model 7),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice			Lyceum choice			Technical choice			Vocational choice		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE
Background	-.25	.309	.25	.31	.158	.22	.39	.074	.22	-.22	.362	.25	.32	.151	.22	.38	.079	.22
PTS										.16	.144	.11	-.15	.126	.10	-.02	.881	.10
PPAS										.23	.053	.12	-.06	.560	.11	-.029	.785	.11
PPES										.18	.150	.12	.23	.041	.11	-.001	.991	.11
R^2	.004			.007			.01			.05			.03			.01		
F	1.04			2.01			3.21			3.94			1.93			0.83		
df	(1, 295)			(1, 293)			(1, 293)			(4, 295)			(4, 293)			(4, 293)		
p	.309			.158			.074			.004			.106			.506		
$R^2 \Delta$										.05			.02			.001		
$F \Delta$										4.89			1.89			0.05		
$df \Delta$										(3, 291)			(3, 289)			(3, 289)		
$p \Delta$										.002			.131			.986		

Note: $N = 296$ for lyceum choice, $N = 294$ for technical choice, for vocational choice $N = 294$

Lyceum choice = Probability of student's tracking in Lyceum, Technical choice= probability of student's tracking in technical Institutions, Vocational choice= Probability of student's tracking in vocational track PTS= Perceived Teacher's Support, PPAS= Perceived Parents' Support, PPAS= Perceived Parents' Support, PPES Perceived Peers' Support.

The Effect of Student's Background and Relational Variables School's Recommended Track Choice

Table 5.14. presents the regression analysis for school's recommended track choice considering student's background and relational variables. In Step 1 student's background had significant positive association with vocational track recommendation ($B = .50, p = .021$). No significant association was observed for background with the recommendation of lyceum and technical track recommendations. The model explained 1.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .018$), while for lyceum R^2 was .008 and for technical track $R^2 = .001$ and models were not significant.

In step 2, the relational variables slightly increased in explanatory effect of background on recommendation of vocational track with background remaining significant. Perceived teacher support negatively impacted technical track recommendations ($B = -.28, p = .004$), while perceived peer support positively influenced lyceum and technical tracks. Perceived parental support did not significantly predict any track recommendations.

The inclusion of the relational variables improved the explanatory power of the models for the recommendation of the track. In step2the models for lyceum and technical tracks, explaining 5.8% of the variance ($R^2 = .058$) and yielding significant results ($F(4, 292) = 4.43, p = .002$ for both). The model for vocational track explained 2.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .026$) but was not significant ($F(4, 289) = 1.90, p = .110$).

Table 5.14 Regression analysis for School's recommended track choice with student's background and relational variables (model8),

	Step 1									Step 2								
	Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track			Lyceum track			Technical track			Vocational track		
	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>
Background	-.36	.123	.24	.14	.531	.22	.50	.021	.22	-.34	.146	.23	.14	.507	.21	.50	.022	.22
PTS										.001	.996	.10	-.28	.004	.10	.05	.614	.10
PPAS										.19	.087	.11	-.11	.286	.10	-.02	.857	.11
PPES										.31	.007	.12	.36	.001	.11	-.15	.156	.11
<i>R</i> ²		.008			.001			.018			.058			.058			.026	
<i>F</i>		2.40			.39			5.35			4.43			4.43			1.90	
<i>df</i>		(1, 292)			(1, 290)			(1, 289)			(4, 292)			(4, 290)			(4, 289)	
<i>p</i>		.123			.531			.021			.002			.002			.110	
<i>R</i> ² Δ											.050			.057			.008	
<i>F</i> Δ											5.08			5.77			0.76	
<i>df</i> Δ											(3, 288)			(3, 286)			(3, 285)	
<i>p</i> Δ											.002			.001			.519	

Note: *N* = 293 for lyceum track, *N* = 291 for technical track, *N* = 290 for vocational track.

PTS= Perceived Teacher's Support, PPAS=Perceived Parents' Support, PPES= Perceived Peers' Support, Lyceum track= Recommendation of Lyceum, Technical track= Recommendation of Technical Institutions, Vocational track= Recommendation of Vocational Track.

The Effect of Student's Background and Relational Variables on Academic Performance

Table 5.15 reports the regression analysis for academic performance with student's background and relational variables. At Step1 student's background had a negative significant association with the performance variables,. All the models in the regression analysis were significant. For both math score and Italian score R^2 value was ($R^2 = .03$) explaining 3% of variance. For both math GPA and Italian GPA, the R^2 value explained 7% of the variance.

In Step2 after the inclusion of the relational variables the explanatory of student's background was not decreased, and remained negatively associated with all performance measures. Perceived teacher's support was positively associated with Italian score ($B = .012, p = .012$) and Italian GPA ($B = .12, p = .051$). but had no significant effect on math outcomes. Perceived peers support was positively associated with Italian score ($B = .18, p = .045$), and Italian GPA ($B = .18, p = .008$), though it did not significantly impact math performance. The result did not show any significant association between perceived parent support and performance variables. Although all the models remained significant in the second step, the inclusion of the relational variables had a minimal impact on the models. For Math score R^2 value was ($R^2 = .06$) explaining 6% of variance, for both Italian score and math GPA R^2 value explained 9% of the variance. Lastly, the result showed the ($R^2 = .12$) for Italian GPA which explained 12% of the variance.

Table 5.15 Regression analysis for academic performance with student's background and relational variables (Model9),

	Step1												Step 2											
	Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA			Math score			Italian score			Math GPA			Italian GPA		
	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE	β	p	SE
Background	-.65	.004	.23	-.53	.004	.18	-.91	<.001	.20	-.66	<.001	.14	-.68	.003	.23	-.55	.002	.18	-.92	<.001	.20	-.66	<.001	.14
PTS													.15	.134	.10	.21	.012	.08	.16	.081	.09	.12	.051	.06
PPAS													.03	.775	.11	.06	.483	.09	-.04	.651	.10	.005	.940	.07
PPES													.19	.099	.11	.18	.045	.09	.17	.084	.10	.18	.008	.07
R^2	.03			.03			.07			.07			.06			.09			.09			.12		
F	8.32			8.51			20.48			22.08			4.22			6.89			7.27			.93		
df	(1, 289)			(1, 282)			(1, 284)			(1, 285)			(4, 289)			(4, 282)			(4, 284)			(4, 285) 9		
p	.004			.004			<.001			<.001			.002			<.001			<.001			<.001		
$R^2 \Delta$													.03			.06			.03			.05		
$F\Delta$													2.80			6.20			2.74			5.52		
$df\Delta$													(3, 285)			(3, 278)			(3, 280)			(3, 281)		
$p\Delta$													.040			<.001			.044			.001		

Note: $N = 290$ for Math score, $N = 283$ for Italian score, $N = 285$ for Math GPA and $N = 286$ for Italian GPA.

PTS= Perceived Teacher's Support, PPAS= Perceived Parents' Support, PPES= Perceived Peers' Support, Math score= Recent Math Score, Italian score= Recent Italian Score, Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year

5.8 Discussion

Through correlational research design, this study explored the relationships between various factors and academic outcomes among immigrant adolescents. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the predictive power of sociocultural level and socio-economic status (SES), along with relational factors such as teacher, parental, and peer support, commonly considered in educational and sociological research. Additionally, we examined individual factors, including identity exploration and resolution, as predictors of academic performance and academic track choice among students transitioning to high school in Italy. The study examined how three groups of variables influenced academic outcomes using hierarchical regression analysis. Data were gathered from a sample of 368 native and non-native participants through questionnaires given to second and third-graders from seven public lower secondary schools in Verona, as well as their parents.

First, the hypothesis regarding the existence of a gap among the students with immigrant parents was tested. The results revealed that interestingly no significant disparities in track choices between students with both immigrant parents and those with at least one Italian parent. However, in line with the findings of the studies by Azzolini and Barone (2013), the analysis indicated that students with both parents with immigrant backgrounds perceive themselves as more likely to be recommended for vocational tracks, and less likely to be recommended for lyceum. While the t-test results revealed that the gap between these groups was relatively small it remains significant and warrants attention. This disadvantage might lead to the persistence of lower social class for students with immigrant backgrounds. As the studies about social reproduction by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) indicated, students recommended for vocational tracks may remain in less-paid jobs and professions, perpetuating their lower social status. Notably, disparities have been found in academic performance in both math and Italian, with students having at least one Italian parent outperforming those with both non-Italian parents. This result highlights the academic disadvantage faced by students from migrant backgrounds.

Then the second hypothesis regarding the links between SES variables and academic outcomes was examined. Findings in line with research by Chung (2015), highlighted the nuanced relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement. This gap might be related to the effects of negative stereotypes on the cognitive performance discussed in chapters two and three of this dissertation. (Schmader et al., 2008; Schmader and Beilock, 2012; Steele &

Aronson,1995; Steele et al., 2002). The Stereotype threat is linked to poorer learning and disidentification from school due to reduced cognitive resources. This impacts task performance for students belonging to a stereotyped group under psychological stress, consuming their cognitive resources. (e.g., Appel and Kronberger, 2012; Appel et al., 2011; Rydell et al., 2010; Taylor & Walton, 2011). By addressing the similarities between the groups (Rosenthal et al., 2007) it may be possible to reduce the stereotype threat and increase the performance.

Regarding the connection between SES variables and students' track choice, findings showed that lower SES is associated with a reduced likelihood of choosing the lyceum. The analysis demonstrated that higher family income increases the probability of choosing the lyceum, suggesting that financial resources positively influence track choice. However, for technical and vocational institutions, there is no significant difference between immigrant students and those with mixed or Italian parents. For lyceum choice, this connection persists for immigrant students even with socioeconomic and socio-cultural factors included. This highlights the critical role of SES in accessing higher-tier education, emphasizing the importance of financial resources for immigrant students aiming for prestigious academic tracks. These findings align with the research by Seghers et al. (2021) which illustrates how social class shapes educational decision-making processes. It underscores that economic resources can significantly impact educational opportunities, potentially perpetuating inequalities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Economic resources significantly impact educational opportunities, potentially perpetuating inequalities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Educators and policymakers must address these disparities with a multifaceted approach, considering both socioeconomic and socio-cultural factors. Targeted interventions and financial support are crucial to help immigrant students access higher-tier tracks like lyceum. A comprehensive approach, including economic support and cultural inclusivity, is essential for promoting educational equity. When family income is taken into account, the influence of students' immigrant background on the perception of being recommended for technical schools decreases. In other words, immigrant students, when their family income and other background factors are considered, are less likely to be placed in technical schools. The results also showed that regardless of the immigrant background, students with higher family income and greater cultural engagement are more likely to be seen as suitable for placement in the lyceum. Conversely, students with lower family incomes are more likely to be recommended for technical and vocational tracks. This highlights the

importance of socioeconomic and cultural factors in educational outcomes, overshadowing the direct impact of background in this context. The findings are consistent with Geven (2024), who demonstrated that teachers' interpretations of school procedures and their own tracking criteria can introduce a bias in track recommendations, particularly when they place greater emphasis on students' home environments and family SES. This underscores the need to address SES biases in teacher perceptions and decision-making processes, as these biases can perpetuate educational inequalities by steering students from lower-income families toward less prestigious educational tracks.

Interestingly, the analysis revealed a positive, though marginally significant, association between the mother's education level and the likelihood of a student being recommended for the lyceum track. As mothers are generally more involved in their children's education than fathers (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016), this involvement could play a critical role in shaping educational outcomes. However, ethnic minority parents are often less involved in their children's schooling, partly due to lower levels of education and language proficiency (Pels, 2003) which may hinder their ability to support academic aspirations effectively. Higher educational attainment among mothers could lead to greater involvement in their children's education, thereby enhancing the likelihood of placement in more academically oriented tracks such as the lyceum. This suggests the importance of maternal education in mitigating ethnic educational inequalities and fostering academic success among immigrant students. Further research is needed to explore whether increasing parental, especially maternal, involvement in schooling could contribute to promoting higher academic track placements and overall academic success for students from immigrant backgrounds.

The analysis related to the hypothesis regarding the links between SES variables and students' academic performance initially revealed that the student's background was initially found to be negatively associated with all performance indicators. However, when controlling for SES variables, the connection between immigrant background and performance disappeared. Also, for Italian and mixed students, socioeconomic factors, particularly family income and parental education, play a critical role in academic performance. Additionally, higher levels of the father's education are positively linked to better recent and final Italian scores. On the other hand, cultural consumption and the mother's education level did not show any significant connection with performance variables, except for a minor positive association with Italian scores. These results

underscore the significance of socioeconomic status, particularly family income and parental education, in determining academic success. They align with existing literature, highlighting the enduring influence of SES factors on students' educational achievements (Driessen & Dekkers, 1997; Marks, 2005; Schimd, 2001). Policymakers and educators should focus on reducing socioeconomic disparities in education by addressing family income and parental education barriers and fostering academic excellence and equity for all students.

Next, the connections between individual difference variables and academic outcomes have been tested. While no research in literature has directly examined the relationship between identity exploration and identity resolution and academic outcomes, the studies by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2015, 2017) have demonstrated their indirect effects on academic results. In line with several studies in the literature, the results of the present study found that self-esteem plays a role in performance (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977; Coopersmith, 1967; Covington, 1989; Holly, 1987; Purky, 1970; Reasoner, 2005; Reynolds, 1988; Vishalakshi & Yeshodhara 2012; Walz & Bleuer, 1992; Wylie, 1979). However, we are aware of some studies suggesting that performance can impact self-esteem. (Baumeister et al., 2003; Scheirer & Kraut, 1979). Nonetheless, from our findings, it appears that this relationship does not reduce the gap among immigrant students. Regarding the school orientation, self-esteem was not found to be associated with student's choice. Only a link was found between higher levels of self-esteem and the probability of being recommended to lyceum for Italian or mixed-origin students. Moreover, although modest, correlations show that higher self-esteem and greater identity resolution are associated with marginally better academic outcomes. These findings suggest a potential role for socioemotional and psychological factors, such as self-esteem, in educational interventions and support programs aimed at promoting academic success among diverse student populations. However, the results are marginal and warrant further investigation to establish their significance.

Then the association between relational factors and academic outcomes was tested. The results of the analysis indicated that the gap in performance between immigrant students and Italian or mixed students persisted and was not reduced by controlling for the perceived social support from teachers, parents, and peers. Therefore, the variables did not appear relevant. Interestingly, findings showed that, both perceived teacher 's and peers' support are linked with the performance in Italian. Existing literature has extensively documented the importance of peer support in language development and academic success among emergent bilingual students (Carhill-poza, 2015).

Additionally, results align with the literature indicating that upon the increase in frequency of perceived support from teachers and peers the recent score and final score in Italian improve. This result might also underscore the significant role of relational support from teachers in increasing school belonging and motivation (Felner et al., 1985; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). It also highlights the role of peers in enhancing students' academic performance and their educational tracks by improving motivation (Veronneau & Dishion, 2011), and inspiration (Berzin, 2010).

A student's immigrant background was not found to be associated with the choice or recommendation of school tracks, except for the perceived probability of being recommended to vocational institutions. Although this pertains to the perception of the likelihood of such placement, Italian national statistics (cited in previous chapters) show that immigrant students are more frequently placed in vocational tracks. In the data, higher levels of perceived parental support were linked to the choice of the lyceum, and a greater frequency of perceived peer support appeared to increase the probability of choosing technical schools. However, interactions between background and perceived support were not explicitly tested, so these trends should be interpreted with caution. Similarly, perceived peer support is associated with the perception of being recommended to a lyceum, but its specific relevance for different groups remains untested. The vocational tracks are often associated with lower socioeconomic status and the overrepresentation of immigrant students in vocational tracks may hinder their social mobility, perpetuating educational inequity. Systemic bias in the educational system limits opportunities for higher education and professional careers. Reform is needed to ensure fair track recommendations and counteract unconscious biases in educators.

Since the literature lacks direct research on the effect of social support on track choices, particularly concerning perceived support from close relationships like teachers, peers, and parents, these results contribute to understanding the effects of perceived social support on tracking in secondary schools.

5.8.1 Limitations

The generalizability of this study's findings may be limited due to its focus on a specific geographic location, Verona, Italy, and a demographic group of participants, lower secondary school students. To address this limitation, future research should include a more diverse geographic scope and a broader demographic range of participants. Expanding the study to multiple regions within Italy

and to different educational levels could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing educational track choices across various contexts. Additionally, conducting comparative studies in different countries could offer valuable insights into how cultural and regional differences impact these academic outcomes.

Caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings to other regions or age groups. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from adolescents and parents introduces potential response bias. Additionally, an important issue in this study was the large number of missing responses to the question about family income. Many parents did not respond to this item, which significantly decreased the number of respondents regarding the socioeconomic status of the families. Future research should implement strategies to minimize socially desirable responses and misreporting, such as ensuring anonymity and using more indirect questioning techniques. Additionally, researchers should develop methods to improve response rates for sensitive questions like family income, possibly through enhanced communication with parents about the importance of providing this information and guaranteeing confidentiality. Employing alternative measures of socioeconomic status, such as neighborhood indicators or school-level SES data, could also help mitigate the issue of missing data.

Future longitudinal studies could offer more insight into the temporal relationships among socioeconomic, individual, and relational factors, and academic outcomes.

Although validated scales were used, cultural adaptation and translation of the instruments may introduce measurement errors or inconsistencies in assessing constructs such as self-esteem and perceived social support.

Furthermore, the sample predominantly consists of Italian students, with only a small proportion of non-Italian students. This imbalance may affect the study's ability to fully capture the experiences and academic outcomes of immigrant students in Italy. Future research should aim to include a more balanced representation of Italian and non-Italian students. Researchers could achieve this by employing targeted sampling strategies to recruit a larger proportion of immigrant students. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and academic outcomes of both native and immigrant students in Italy. Additionally, conducting focused studies specifically on immigrant student populations could yield deeper insights into the unique challenges and factors influencing their educational trajectories.

5.9 Conclusions

The present correlational research explored the relationships between various factors and academic outcomes among immigrant adolescents. This study investigated the impact of sociological, individual, and relational factors on the academic outcomes of students with an immigrant background in lower secondary schools in Verona. By investigating the academic trajectories of students transitioning to high school, this study underscores the systemic barriers and enabling factors that shape their educational experiences.

Although this study identified statistically significant gaps in immigrant and nonimmigrant achievement, these gaps explain very little of the variability in academic tracking.

One of the study's most significant findings is the crucial role of socioeconomic status in shaping academic performance and track placement, often outweighing the influence of immigrant background itself.

This highlights how structural inequalities, such as lower family income and limited access to cultural resources, contributes to the in educational disparities experienced by immigrant students. Importantly, the findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions that address socioeconomic disadvantages to ensure equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of their background.

The study also highlighted the nuanced role of parental education, particularly mother's education level in influencing track placement and academic outcomes. Higher maternal education improves academic prospects, highlighting the importance of parental involvement. This underscores that disparities in parental resources must be addressed to ensure equity.

Psychological factors such as self-esteem and identity resolution were found to be associated though marginally to academic success. This suggests that while these aspects contribute to educational success, they are insufficient in narrowing the achievement gap for immigrant students. These findings call for a more integrated approach, combining socioemotional support with structural reforms to address disparities comprehensively.

Relational variables such as perceived support from parents, teachers and peers emerged as significant in influencing certain educational decisions. However, they did not seem to be relevant in the achievement gap. This highlights the need to explore how social relationships can promote fairer educational outcomes.

Overall, the study highlights the multifaceted that academic achievement among immigrant students is shaped by a many interrelated factors. The findings highlight the need for exploration

of programs and policies supporting immigrant students, aimed at reducing educational disparities and promoting equity. Building on these conclusions, the next chapter will delve into a review of intervention studies designed to reduce the academic achievement gap. Through a review of various programs and policies aimed at supporting immigrant students and addressing the identified factors, the next chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of effective strategies and measures to foster academic success and equity for all students.

Table 5.16 (Appendix)*Nationalities and Place of Birth of Participants*

Sample Nationalities	<i>Missing</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Country of Birth for students with immigrant background			
		23	
Sri Lanka		7	30.4
Romani		1	4.3
Albania		1	4.3
Moldavia		4	17.4
Morocco		1	4.3
China		1	4.3
Ukraine		3	13.0
India		1	4.3
Rep-Dominican		1	4.3
Colombia		1	4.3
Bangladesh		1	4.3
Greece		1	4.3
Country of birth for mothers non born in Italy			
		110	
Sri Lanka		25	22.7
Romania		13	11.08
Albania		9	8.2
Moldavia		9	8.2
Morocco		9	8.2
China		6	5.5
Tunisia		4	3.6
Nigeria		4	3.6
Ukraine		5	4.5

Brasile	4	3.6
Senegal	3	2.7
Ghana	2	1.8
India	1	0.9
Dominican Rep.	2	1.8
Philippine	1	0.9
Venezuela	1	0.9
Czechia Rep.	1	0.9
Colombia	1	0.9
Russia	2	1.8
Pakistan	1	0.9
Bangladesh	1	0.9
France	1	0.9
Poland	1	0.9
Peru	2	1.8
Switzerland	1	0.9
Ecuador	1	0.9

Country of birth for fathers non born in

Italy	101	
Sri Lanka	26	25.7
Romania	8	7.9
Albania	11	10.9
Moldavia	9	8.9
Morocco	6	5.9
China	5	5.0
Tunisia	5	5.0
Nigeria	4	4.0
Ukraine	1	1.0
Brasile	2	2.0
Senegal	3	3.0

Ghana	2	2.0
USA	3	3.0
India	1	1.0
Dominican Rep	3	3.0
Philippine	1	1.0
Colombia	1	1.0
Germany	2	2.0
Sweden	1	1.0
Russia	1	1.0
Dem. Rep.Congo	1	1.0
Pakistan	1	1.0
Bangladesh	1	1.0
Peru	2	2.0
Argentina	1	1.0

Note: N = 368 (for each group), Mothers born in Italy n = 258 Fathers born in Italy n = 267 and students born in Italy n = 345

Table 5.17 (Appendix)

Results of t-test for independent groups for Coding2 for background (Both parents Italian and At least one parent non-Italian)

	Both parents Italian		At least one parent non-Italian		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
	Student's choice						
Lyceum choice	4.45	1.75	4.15	1.79	1.47	337	.142
Technical choice	3.43	1.55	3.60	1.66	-0.89	333	.377
Vocational choice	2.47	1.49	2.68	1.61	-1.16	333	.248
Recommended-Track							
Lyceum track	4.26	1.60	3.95	1.79	1.58	333	.115
Technical track	3.52	1.46	3.43	1.59	0.48	330	.633
Vocational track	2.63	1.43	2.96	1.66	-1.88	330	.061
Last Score							
Math score	7.54	1.57	7.06	1.67	2.48	327	.014
Italian score	7.83	1.26	7.38	1.29	2.97	322	.003
GPA last year							
Math GPA	7.84	1.33	7.13	1.46	4.31	319	<.001
Italian GPA	7.84	0.97	7.36	1.01	4.14	320	<.001

Note: $N = 368$ $n = 234$ for subjects with Both parents Italian and ($n=117$) for group At least one parent non- Italian. Math GPA and Italian GPA = Grade point average achieved in Math and in Italian at the conclusion of previous year.

CHAPTER 6

6. Addressing Effective Interventions and Best Practices for the Reduction of Achievement Gap

The academic achievement gap is shaped by a range of psychological, socio-economic, and social factors, which have been thoroughly reviewed in the previous chapters. These factors are not only crucial in understanding the achievement gap but also in evaluating why certain interventions may succeed or fail when supporting immigrant students. Some of the most influential factors, already discussed in detail, include socio-economic status (e.g., Dos Santos & Wolff, 2011; Jia, 2019; Li & Yang, 2015), acculturation attitudes (e.g., António & Monteiro, 2015b), stereotype threat (e.g. Appel et al., 2015; Froehlich et al., 2022), dual identities (e.g., Baysu & Phalet, 2019), residence culture identity strength (Weber et al., 2015) and teachers' expectations (e.g., Kawakami et al., 2002; Van den Bergh et al., 2010) as well as the community and school policies (e.g., Baker, 2017; Celeste et al., 2019).

By understanding these psychological and social factors, educators and policymakers can design interventions that not only address the academic gap but also respond to the broader socio-cultural and emotional needs of immigrant students. Building on the factors discussed in the previous chapters, this review turned to how they are addressed in different interventions and which approaches are most effective in narrowing the achievement gap.

A few key reviews have examined interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap, particularly in relation to socio-economic, racial, and psychological barriers affecting marginalized groups. For instance, Easterbrook and Hadden (2020) reviewed social psychological interventions targeting students' subjective experiences, focusing on how social identity threats and identity incompatibility contribute to educational inequalities. Their "Identities in Context" model explains how features of the educational environment can trigger these identity threats, highlighting the importance of addressing psychological barriers. However, while their work provides valuable insights into how identity-based challenges can affect students, it primarily focuses on racial disparities, rather than the specific challenges faced by immigrant students. The unique educational struggles—shaped by migration, cultural transitions, and language barriers— may require approaches that are, at least in part, distinct.

Recently, do Carmo-Gouveia et al. (2023) have conducted a systematic review focusing on interventions that address racial and socio-economic disparities. They found that strategies targeting reading skills, subject-specific interventions, and programs addressing internalized discrimination were most effective. However, their review did not focus specifically on immigrant students.

Other scholars have examined the achievement gap from a social class perspective. Dittmann and Stephens (2017) identified three primary factors contributing to the social class achievement gap: individual skills, structural conditions, and meaning-making processes (referred to as construals). They also examined interventions targeting each of these areas, highlighting the importance of addressing both individual and systemic factors to effectively reduce educational disparities. They emphasized the importance of tailoring interventions to the specific needs of students and their educational contexts, a principle also relevant to interventions designed for immigrant populations.

Porter (2007) highlighted that closing the test score gap is central to reducing racial inequalities in education and earnings, underscoring the importance of educational reform to address long-standing inequalities, though again, the focus is more on racial gaps than on immigrant students.

Haxhiu (2022) examined equity-based educational practices and their effectiveness in reducing achievement gaps, particularly for underprivileged students. Her findings underscored the need for strong support structures, resource mobilization, and community participation in sustaining these interventions.

Also, a few systematic reviews have been conducted on educational interventions aimed at addressing academic disparities, particularly those related to SES. Sirin (2005) presented one of the most comprehensive reviews, focusing on the relationship between SES and academic achievement. Sirin's study, a replication of White's (1982) earlier work, aimed to evaluate the strength of this relationship, uncover moderating factors, and observe changes over time. Sirin's findings confirmed a moderate effect size between SES and achievement and a strong connection between school area and achievement, which has weakened since White's initial study. These results potentially indicate the positive effects of compensatory educational measures or improving living conditions.

Building on this, Berkowitz et al. (2017) conducted a critical review exploring whether a positive school and class climate could mitigate the association between low SES and poor

academic outcomes. They found that a supportive school climate contributes positively to academic achievement, especially for students from lower SES backgrounds. This work emphasizes the importance of environmental factors in narrowing the achievement gap.

A targeted systematic review and meta-analysis is Dietrichson et al. (2017), which examined effective academic interventions for elementary and middle school students with low SES. Their review highlighted a range of interventions—from parent training and early childhood programs to health and role model interventions—that positively impacted academic outcomes. Interventions such as tutoring, feedback, progress monitoring, and cooperative learning showed particular promise in improving achievement among low SES students.

Ultimately, Ashraf et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate interventions targeted at Free Meal student beneficiaries. They found positive effects on literacy outcomes but no significant improvement in mathematics, with no evidence that the gap between Free Meal and Non-Free Meal students was reduced.

This chapter extends the discussion by conducting a systematic review that specifically examines interventions addressing the achievement gap between immigrant students and native students, incorporating a broader range of factors discussed earlier.

6.1 Rationale of Current Study

Although the review studies mentioned above provide valuable insights into the achievement gap, most focus on racial or socio-economic disparities. While many studies focus on racial disparities, immigrant students face distinct challenges that are compounded by factors such as language barriers and migration-related stressors. Ethno-racial groups in certain regions reflect the specific racial dynamics and historical inequalities of those areas (Morawska, 2008). However, there is a notable lack of research that reviews interventions targeting immigrant students, a distinct group whose educational challenges are shaped not only by socioeconomic disparities but also by factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and migration-related stressors (Azzolini & Barone, 2013). Much of the current literature emphasizes socio-economic and racial inequalities, leaving the challenges faced by immigrant students underexplored. The present study aimed to address that gap by reviewing and assessing interventions designed to narrow the achievement gap among immigrant students in Western countries. By concentrating on this specific population, this research seeks to fill critical gaps in the literature and contribute to the development of effective, evidence-based strategies tailored to the unique needs of immigrant students. This focus on immigrant students,

particularly in the Italian and Western context, provides new insights and expands the scope of existing research on educational interventions.

During adolescence, developmental challenges can arise from a discrepancy between the evolving needs of adolescents and the opportunities available to them in their social environment. This mismatch, which occurs in both school and home settings, is often associated with declines in academic motivation and slower progress in cognitive development compared to the earlier developmental stages (Eccles et al., 1997). Given the importance of adolescence as a critical developmental period, this review focused on students aged 5-19 in elementary, lower secondary, and higher secondary education. While the inclusion of younger children acknowledges the foundational role of early education in shaping later academic trajectories (Arpino et al., 2018), university-level education or individuals over 19 were excluded to maintain the coherence and scope of the review. Additionally, this review builds upon the earlier discussion of factors influencing the achievement gap by exploring how these factors are addressed through interventions.

In addition to this age-based focus, the review also applied specific criteria regarding the target populations of the studies. For instance, studies that addressed the achievement gap among refugees or unaccompanied minors were excluded, as these groups often experience distinct migration trajectories and face unique challenges compared to other immigrant students (Suárez-Orozco, 2017). This exclusion helps maintain a focus on students with more comparable migration backgrounds, ensuring a cohesive analysis of the interventions under review. However, interventions targeting ethnic minorities were included only when the group was explicitly described as having an immigrant background.

In evaluating the success of educational interventions, it is important to differentiate between 'hard' and 'soft' academic outcomes. Hard outcomes refer to quantifiable measures of success, such as student retention rates, course completion, and work-related achievements, including the number of graduates securing jobs in their fields (Ministry of Education, 2006). These outcomes are concrete and can be objectively measured through statistical data. In contrast, soft outcomes emphasize more subjective aspects of success, focusing on students' perceptions of their progress toward personal and program goals (Butcher et al., 2006). The evaluation approach through the soft-outcomes values students' self-assessed growth and development rather than only focusing on external metrics. Additionally, student engagement, encompassing

their cognitive investment, active participation, and emotional commitment to learning, plays a critical role in shaping these soft outcomes (Chapman, 2003).

While both hard and soft academic outcomes were considered in this review, only studies addressing key outcomes such as academic performance, track choice, educational attainment, and delayed schooling were included. Studies that also tracked soft outcomes were retained if they measured these key indicators, but those focused solely on soft outcomes were excluded. This selective approach ensures the review remains focused on the most significant measures of academic success while acknowledging relevant soft outcomes, aligning with the dissertation's goals.

Achievement gaps between immigrant students or ethnic minorities and their peers may vary depending on the context in which they are situated. The causes of the gap also differ across contexts. Therefore, various interventions have been developed to address the achievement gap, depending on the identified causes within each context (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021). In this review, we will examine interventions from multiple academic fields including social psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, and education that aim to reduce the academic achievement gap among immigrant students and ethnic minorities.

Despite initially excluding studies addressing racial or ethnic achievement gaps, many studies from the US contextualize the achievement gap within broader racial and ethnic frameworks. Since minorities in the US often differ not only in terms of migration background but also race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, interventions targeting these groups were included if they aligned with the other criteria. However, interventions targeting ethnic minorities were only included when the group was explicitly described as having an immigrant background, or if the study considered these groups as minorities due to factors beyond race alone, such as socio-economic or linguistic disadvantages.

6.2. Method

6.2.1 Research Questions

This systematized narrative review, followed the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 3, adapted specifically to identify and analyze interventions targeting the achievement gap among immigrant students. A literature search across PsycInfo, Scopus, and ERIC used interdisciplinary keywords with no publication year restrictions and yielded 389 records. Out of this number, only a few studies related to interventions were identified. Due to the low number of studies, a snowballing strategy was activated, resulting in a final set of 33 studies.

The focus of this review was on evaluating and synthesizing the existing evidence on interventions designed to narrow the achievement gap between immigrant and native students. In particular, the present review seeks to answer the following key question:

1. What evidence-based interventions have been effective in reducing the academic achievement gap between immigrant and native students in Western countries?
2. Which specific challenges or factors that immigrant students face are addressed by the interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap between immigrant and native students?
3. To what extent do interventions targeting immigrant students differ in effectiveness across different educational levels (e.g., middle school, high school) and cultural or geographical contexts (e.g., different countries)?

To explore these questions, this review examined various types of interventions, and any replication studies related to them, analyzing their effectiveness. Additionally, it delved into the strategies that best tackle the barriers and obstacles unique to immigrant students, highlighting approaches that offer the most promise for bridging the achievement gap.

6.2.2 Procedures and Search Strategies

In this systematized narrative review, the search process used to examine interventions addressing the achievement gap was part of a broader inquiry into studies on immigrant and native student disparities. Following the same procedure discussed in Chapter 3, a keyword string was employed across three databases (PsycInfo, Scopus, and ERIC), ensuring an interdisciplinary approach. The literature search was conducted without restriction to the year of publication to ensure a comprehensive review of the relevant research.

Through this process, studies were categorized into two groups: those focused on factors contributing to the achievement gap and those addressing interventions to close the gap. Of the 389 records included in the analysis, 26 studies were initially identified as specifically related to interventions and best practices. However, only seven articles met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the review. A snowballing search strategy was subsequently applied, in which references from initially identified studies were reviewed to locate additional relevant research. Additionally, two articles were included based on expert suggestions, resulting in the final inclusion of 33 studies focused on effective intervention strategies.

The same analysis strategies used in the previous review were applied here. The abstract and title screening was conducted by two independent researchers, followed by a full-text screening of the intervention-related studies. Only studies published in English or Italian and conducted in Western countries were included. As introduced in the third chapter, the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 3.2) provides a detailed illustration of the screening and selection process used to identify relevant studies for this review. The studies included in the present review met the following criteria:

- Focus on interventions designed to reduce the achievement gap between native students and students from migrant backgrounds, including both first- and second-generation immigrant students aged 5-19. Studies related to elementary, lower secondary, and higher secondary school students were included. Kindergarten studies were only included if they extended to additional school levels.
- Studies addressing immigrant students up to the third generation were included. Additionally, studies targeting specific ethnic minority groups were included if the groups were explicitly identified as immigrants. Studies focusing exclusively on ethnic or racial groups without specific reference to immigrant status were excluded.
- Published studies using either quantitative or qualitative methods, or mixed methods, that specifically assessed the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap.
- Studies conducted in Western countries, including European countries (including Russia and Turkey), the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Studies conducted in Australia, Asia, and Africa were excluded.
- Only studies published in English or Italian were included.

6.2.3 Data Extraction, Synthesis, and Categorization

Data from the included studies were extracted into an Excel 2023 spreadsheet and independently verified by a second author for accuracy. The studies were categorized by intervention type, location (US or EU), and their direct or indirect impact on academic achievement. The distinction between direct and indirect impact refers to whether the intervention was specifically aimed at improving academic outcomes (direct impact) or whether it addressed underlying factors such as motivation or psychological well-being that indirectly influence academic achievement (Adams & Singh, 1988). The variety of study

designs, populations, and outcome measures precluded the possibility of conducting a meta-analysis. A narrative synthesis was preferred to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of the art of existing studies.

6.3. Results

6.3.1 General Characteristics of the Studies

Of the 34 studies included, the vast majority were conducted in the United States ($n = 29$), with the remaining studies ($n = 8$) carried out in European countries such as the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. The participants in these studies came from diverse countries of origin. Specifically, in the US-based studies, the most common groups were African Americans ($n = 18$), Latino/Americans ($n = 17$), and Asian Americans ($n = 10$). In the European studies, participants included individuals of Turkish ($n = 4$) or Arabs or Moroccan ($n = 4$) and Eastern European immigrants in the US ($n = 2$). Some studies have involved groups from different countries of origin as the sample ($n = 4$).

In the studies conducted in the US, minority groups are often referred to as immigrants or ethnic minorities, although some studies did not provide sufficient information about the participants' place of birth or their parents' place of birth. In contrast, in Europe, some studies include third-generation Turkish and Moroccan residents considering this group as immigrants. Due to these differences, we decided to separate the studies conducted in the US ($n = 30$), and Europe ($n = 9$).

Some studies addressed the achievement gap among other disadvantaged groups, such as those from low-income backgrounds or at risk of dropping out ($n = 3$). Only one ($n = 1$) article considered the gender achievement gap in addition to the immigrant/native achievement gap.

Regarding the academic stage, it is important to note that the participants' ages and their school grade levels are not synonymous. Not all articles provided specific information about the participants' ages. Since student ages can vary across different education systems in each country, we used grade level as a more consistent indicator of the educational stage, a method well-supported by the studies. For example, in most education systems “elementary school” typically refers to students in early primary grades (grades 1-5 or 1-6 depending on the system). The majority of the studies ($n = 18$) focused on adolescents in lower secondary school, particularly those in grades 6-12. Some studies specifically examined students in grades 10-12 of higher secondary school ($n = 11$), while only a few studies focused solely on children in

elementary school (grades 1-6, $n = 3$). Additionally, one study spanned more than one school level, covering both elementary and middle school ($n = 1$).

Most studies focused on hard outcomes, with academic performance being the most common indicator ($n = 28$), primarily in the US ($n = 22$), followed by the EU ($n = 5$) and non-EU countries ($n = 1$). Track choice was examined in fewer studies ($n = 3$), predominantly in the US ($n = 2$) and one study from the EU. Educational attainment was also a key focus in a small number of studies ($n = 5$), again primarily in the US ($n = 3$). A few studies ($n = 3$) analyzed more than one outcome, combining measures such as performance, track choice, and attainment. Additionally, one study was included due to its indirect effect on academic outcomes through its impact on academic engagement. Although soft outcomes like attitudes, aspirations, and self-perception were considered, they were not the primary focus of most studies. Table 6.1 presents the characteristics of the studies included in this review.

Table 6.1 Characteristics of the Studies

Citation	Host country	immigrant group origin	School level	Sample size	Type of academic outcome	Type of intervention
Ammar et al., 2021	US	Asian, Black, or African American Hispanic (ELLs & non-ELLs)	Middle school	249	Performance	Community and school support intervention
Binning et al., 2021	US	African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans from low-income families	Middle school	163	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Blackwell et al., 2007a	US	African American, Asian, Latino	Junior Highschool	464	Performance	Growth mindset intervention
Blackwell et al., 2007b	US	African-American, Asian, Latino	Junior Highschool	464	Performance	Growth mindset intervention
Borgna et al., 2022	Italy	immigrants from low-income families	Middle schools	2488	Tracking	Relational intervention
Borman, 2018	US	Black or Hispanic	Middle school	1048	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Bowen et al., 2013	US	African Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans,	Middle school	274	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Celeste et al., 2021	UK	Black African or Black Caribbean or mixed parentage Black or Other Black background, various ethnic-racial backgrounds, South-Asian, European	Secondary school (middle school)	179	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Cheng & Peterson, 2021	US	African and Hispanics	Elementary school	2634	Attainment	School Voucher
Cohen et al., 2006	US	African-American, Latinos & Asian-American	Middle school		Performance	Affirmation intervention
Cohen et al., 2009	US	European Americans, African Americans, Hispanics	Middle school	210	Performance	Affirmation intervention

de Jong et al., 2016	Netherland	Turkish-Dutch or Moroccan Dutch	High school (First year of secondary school)	651	Performance	Affirmation intervention
de Jong et al., 2016	Netherland	Turkish-Dutch or Moroccan Dutch	High school (First year of secondary school)	290	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Dearing et al., 2016	US	China, Cape Verde, Dominican Republic, Guatemala	Elementary school	667	Performance	Community and school support (program enrichment)
Dee, 2015	US	African American, or Hispanic	Middle school	2500	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Duque, 1995	US	Albanian, Chinese, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, Haitian, Polish	Elementary and middle school	195	Performance	Relational intervention (program enrichment)
Gehlbach et al., 2016	US	Latino, Asian, Black, and other	High school	340	Performance	Relational intervention
Good et al., 2003	US	Black, Hispanic, and (low-income "Minorities")	Junior Highschool	138	Performance	Growth mindset intervention
Goyer et al., 2017a	US	Latino-Americans	Middle school	185	Tracking	Affirmation intervention
Goyer et al., 2017b	US	African American	Middle school	339	Attainment	Affirmation intervention
Juang et al., 2020	Germany	Turkish, Arab, Eastern European, and other	Middle school	195	(Academic Adjustment, engagement, and motivation)	Identity Project intervention
Lokhande & Muller, 2019	Germany	Turkish and Arab GIRLS	Middle school	820	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Matthews & Mellom, 2012	US	Students from immigrant families from Latin American and Asian backgrounds	High school	85	Performance Tracking Attainment	Community and school support intervention
Parchment et al., 2016	US	Latinos and Black	High school	212	Performance	Community and school support intervention
Paunesku et al., 2015	US	Minorities at risk of dropout	High school	1.594	Performance	Growth mindset intervention
Protzko & Aronson, 2016	US	Black and Hispanic and Asian	High school	119	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2009	US	African American, European Americans	Middle school	99	Performance	Affirmation intervention

See et al., 2022	UK	Minority and Low-SES	Secondary school (Higher Secondary)	10,807	Performance Attainment	Affirmation intervention
Sherman et al., 2013	US	Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and black Americans (majorly from economically disadvantaged families recently immigrated to the US.)	Middle school	199	Performance	Affirmation intervention
Sherman et al., 2013	US	Latino American, Asian American, Black American, Asian/Asian American, and other	Middle school	185	Performance (in the first study)	Affirmation intervention
Spencer et al., 2005	US	Asian, Black, Hispanic, Other	High school	185	Performance	Monetary incentives intervention
Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018	US	Black or African American, Latino, Asian-American, American Indian or Native American	High school	215	Performance Academic engagement	Identity Project intervention
Yeager et al., 2016b	US	Latino, Black or African American, Asian or Asian-American	High school	3,676	Performance	Growth mindset intervention

Note: $N = 33$ studies

6.3.2 Overview of the Studies

In the following sections, we will present a detailed analysis of the interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap among immigrant students and ethnic minorities in Western countries. This review is organized around six key types of interventions, each targeting specific aspects of academic success and psychological well-being.

The categorization of these interventions was based on their primary focus and methodology, including interventions designed to address stereotype threat, foster positive identity development, and provide relational or financial support to immigrant students facing diverse challenges. Additionally, we highlight interventions aimed at enriching the school environment, with a particular focus on teacher development, family engagement, and support for linguistically disadvantaged students.

Research indicates that the effectiveness of educational interventions often varies by age, with different strategies being more effective at distinct developmental stages (e.g., Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Crone & Dahl, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). Understanding these age-related dynamics is crucial for tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs of immigrant students at various points in their educational journey. Accordingly, this review examined interventions across elementary, middle, and high school levels, considering developmental contexts to assess the appropriateness and potential effectiveness of strategies targeted at each stage.

Each intervention was categorized under one of three main types based on its primary focus: psychological interventions, socio-economic interventions, and community-driven and support-focused school interventions. To maintain coherence with the organization of factors presented in previous chapters of this dissertation, each intervention was categorized under one of three main types based on its primary focus: psychological interventions, socio-economic interventions, and community-driven and support-focused school interventions. This classification ensures clarity and avoids overlap by assigning each intervention to the category that best reflects its central objective.

6.4. Psychological Interventions

Psychological interventions improve student achievement by altering how students experience school, including how they perceive themselves and their classroom environment. They use well-designed, psychologically informed strategies to deliver their message effectively, avoiding negative effects like stigmatization (Yeager et al., 2013). These interventions are

designed to deliver messages in a way that leads to positive shifts in students' thoughts and feelings about school or themselves (Aronson, 1999). Rather than extensively repeating content, they use subtle, brief methods to encourage students to actively engage with the intervention (Yeager et al., 2013). Effective delivery is key, as interventions must target psychological factors influencing performance, rather than external issues like poverty or neighbourhood trauma (Yeager et al., 2012). Though brief, such interventions can set off self-reinforcing processes. A well-timed, targeted psychological intervention can enhance students' relationships, experiences, and performance at a crucial stage, positively influencing their academic trajectory (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Importantly, psychological interventions do not replace traditional reforms, but complement them, helping students better seize educational opportunities (Yeager et al., 2013).

Social-psychological interventions, often referred to as "wise interventions," closely align with broader psychological strategies. These interventions are brief, cost-effective, and specifically target psychological barriers that contribute to the achievement gap, particularly among underperforming students (Binning & Browman, 2020; Easterbrook & Hadden, 2020). By addressing stressors such as stereotype threat, prejudice, and acculturation, these methods help students realize their potential and improve academic outcomes. Like other psychological interventions, "wise interventions" subtly shift how students perceive themselves and their school environment, fostering positive academic experiences without stigmatization (Cohen, 2006; Yeager et al., 2013). By addressing stressors such as stereotype threat, prejudices, and the acculturation process, these interventions help students realize their potential to improve academic outcomes or processes of these students.

As discussed in previous chapters, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience stereotype threat, fearing confirmation of negative stereotypes about their social group (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kawakami et al., 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The cognitive and emotional burdens associated with stereotype threat can hinder performance by diverting attention and reducing working memory (Schmader et al., 2008; Harber et al., 2011), leading to declines in well-being, confidence, learning ability, motivation, and ultimately contributing to the educational gap (Iyer et al., 2009; Manstead, 2018; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019; Taylor & Walton, 2011). This psychological threat is central to many interventions, particularly the affirmation interventions reviewed in the present review ($n = 19$). Self-affirmation theory posits that individuals are motivated to preserve their self-integrity, which consists of a global sense of efficacy and oneself image of being capable and adaptively

adequate to control important and moral outcomes (Aronson et al. 1999, Steel, 1988). According to Steel (1988), threats to self-image can create psychological threats. Key motives underpinning self-integrity include maintaining a narrative of oneself as a moral and adaptive actor (Dunning, 2005), achieving a sense of competence in personally valued areas, and acting in ways that merit esteem rather than simply seeking praise (Wood et al., 2009). Affirmation interventions have been shown to mitigate the negative effects of stereotype threat on self-integrity and enhance performance among stereotyped students (Cohen et al., 2006). By highlighting psychological resources beyond the threatened aspect, these interventions lessen the threat's impact on well-being when viewed within a broader self-concept (Sherman & Harston, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2013). Affirmations foster an approach-oriented response to threats, reducing the likelihood of avoidance behaviours and enabling individuals to manage perceived threats more effectively (Vohs et al., 2013). Consequently, they diminish psychological barriers to change by lowering the effects of psychological threats and minimizing defensive reactions (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Self-affirmation interventions, also known as values affirmation, consist of a brief writing exercise conducted in the classrooms by the teachers at various points of the academic year (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steel, 1988; Wu et al., 2021). These writing tasks aim to encourage the student to reflect on their most important values. An affirmation exercise prior to an assignment or test creates a less stressful academic environment, allowing stereotype-threatened students to reach their full potential. Targeted exercises given at specific times during the school year, such as the first week of classes or before high-stakes tests, can lead to immediate improvements in grades or test scores, reinforcing a positive academic identity. Over time, these incremental successes accumulate fostering a stronger sense of personal adequacy, reshaping teachers' perceptions of students' abilities, and promoting students' spontaneous commitment to self-affirmations when faced with future challenges. As a result, the effects of a brief intervention can have long-lasting and cumulative impacts lasting for months or even years (Cook et al., 2012).

Overall, Steele (2021), finds three key points in these interventions. Firstly, when self-affirmation is shared with the student's teacher may already ameliorate the academic performance. The author emphasizes that the reason for this improvement is probably by alleviating their concerns about being judged based on negative stereotypes associated with their group and by enhancing their self-integrity. Secondly, earlier research consistently

indicates that this worry, along with the accompanying heightened vigilance to potential threats, significantly undermines the academic achievement of groups who face negative stereotypes in society. And finally, even short self-affirming experiences, alleviating these concerns and promoting the positive effects mentioned earlier, can lead to long-term improvements in the academic achievement of these students (Steele, 2021).

Growth mindset interventions, termed "Theories of Intelligence" by Aronson (2002), were designed to reduce the impact of stereotype threat on academic performance. These interventions encourage students to view intelligence as something that can grow with effort, helping to close racial achievement gaps. Using social psychological tactics like the "saying-is-believing" effect (Higgins & Rholes, 1978), students internalize this belief, reinforcing lasting attitude change. In a study, African-American and Caucasian students participating in a pen pal program promoting the growth mindset showed improved academic outcomes compared to control groups (Aronson, 2002). However, these interventions have predominantly been used in the US context to address racial achievement gaps, and their application to other contexts, such as with immigrant students or in different cultural settings, remains underexplored.

Building upon psychological interventions, the Identity Project (IP) is a school-based intervention that focuses on promoting a sense of belonging, acceptance of cultural diversity, and fostering positive interethnic relationships by engaging students in identity exploration activities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017).

The core focus is on fostering ERI development during adolescence, which is a critical phase of identity formation (Erikson, 1968). As adolescents gain cognitive maturity, such as abstract thinking and introspection, they explore new versions of themselves, with success in this phase impacting personal goals, values, and relationships.

ERI, a core part of identity, involves a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1989) and is essential for both ethnic minority and immigrants and majority adolescents (Musso et al., 2018). For ethnic minority adolescents, engaging in ERI exploration and resolution is linked to better psychological well-being, higher self-esteem, and academic success (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). By facilitating ERI exploration and resolution, the IP program improves global identity cohesion, mental health, and academic performance (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017).

The IP curriculum is basically projected as a total of eight weekly 55-minute sessions, led by one leader. Starting the second week students have homework assignment about the content. The program includes both group and individual activities using slides, videos, worksheets, icebreakers, and ethnic identity exploration through family or community interviews (Umaña-Taylor, & Douglass, 2016). The attention control curriculum offers different options such as after high school training, financing their education. A self-report survey which takes approximately 40 minutes is administered as pre-test and then its conducted once one week prior to the end of first session, and again one week before the program ends, then after 12 weeks, 18 weeks, and one year.

Complementing these psychological and educational strategies, monetary incentive interventions are grounded in theories of motivation, particularly the dynamics between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999; Lepper et al., 1999; Rummel & Feinberg 1988; Tang & Hall 1995). Sometimes these interventions are framed by Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 1995). These interventions examine how monetary incentives can influence educational outcomes by affecting or reinforcing identity choices made by adolescents in specific contexts. PVEST proves useful in analyzing the achievement gap, as it considers how demographic and cultural factors such as ethnicity and poverty shape the ways in which youth perceive and navigate their educational environments and opportunities.

Money incentive interventions are sometimes based on the idea of an existing link between achievement orientation and identity development. According to Harackiewicz et al., (1985) students' perceptions of reward can be influenced by their achievement orientation. During the adolescence certain tasks such as establishment of an identity or obtaining peer acceptance become salient (Erickson 1959). These interventions focus on both the perception of reward and how specific incentives can be meaningful to young people's self-perception.

The following sections will provide an overview of intervention studies related to self-affirmation and the Identity Project (IP) that were administered to immigrant students or ethnic minorities, as identified in the review.

6.4.1 Affirmation interventions

- **Replications of Affirmation intervention in US**

Most Affirmation interventions studies focused on African American and Hispanic students, with later studies expanding to include Latino, Asian-American, and multiracial socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Regarding the school level, most of these interventions were conducted in middle schools, often targeting students in 7th or 8th grade, with some extending into high school transition periods (Goyer et al., 2017).

The original intervention by Cohen and colleagues (2006; 2009) focused on African American students, particularly those who were socioeconomically disadvantaged. The intervention reduced the achievement gap. Specifically, the intervention in 2006 helped mitigate the typical decline in academic performance often observed among African American students throughout the academic year by 40%, especially benefiting those who were initially performing poorly (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Easterbrook et al., 2021). Similarly, the trial in 2009 demonstrated long-term effects, showing that the overall GPA of African American students increased by an average of 0.24 grade points. Among students who initially had lower academic performance, the increase was even more substantial, with their GPA increasing by an average of 0.41 points. Furthermore, the intervention resulted in a lower rate of remediation or grade repetition for these students (5% compared to 18%). Additionally, the students who received the intervention reported long-term benefits in terms of their self-perceptions (Cohen et al., 2009).

This pioneer study published by Cohen et al. (2006, 2009) in *Science* has been replicated several times in US for the reduction of the ethnic-racial achievement gap. There were seven articles, replicating the first study in US context. The early replication studies repeat the same procedures as the Cohen and colleagues' study (2006, 2009). These studies report similar results to the original study.

In terms of design, all affirmation studies in US employed experimental designs, with most of them using RCT design. However, two trials introduced enhancements like double-blind methods (Purdi-Vaughns et al., 2009) or environmental interventions (Bowen et al., 2013). Purdi-Vaughns et al., (2009) through a double-blind field experiment, aimed to enhance confidence in the internal validity of their findings by reducing bias, reports the effect size of the intervention was approximately 0.30 grade points. Also, their two-years follow up study assessed the academic performance of three separated cohorts and showed that the persisting effects of the intervention.

The study by Bowen et al. (2013) in addition to the traditional writing assignment introduced an environmental reinforcement, where the teacher reads the students' essay. Additionally, this study added to the sample the Asian-American and multiracial students. While Asian Americans are often associated with positive academic stereotypes, students in underperforming, low-income school environments, regardless of ethnicity, may experience stereotype-related pressures linked to socioeconomic status and school underperformance. In this study, Asian American, European American, and multiracial students served as the comparison group. In line with Cohen et al.'s study (2006), they found that the affirmation condition significantly reduced the decline in Social Studies grades over the school year. The combined condition—where teachers read the affirming essays—produced even stronger effects, suggesting that this added teacher engagement amplified the intervention's benefits by fostering an environment where students felt more individually recognized and less subject to stereotype threat. While African American students were a primary focus, the study also noted potential benefits across other groups; however, differences between groups were not statistically significant, likely due to sample size constraints and the influence of overlapping stereotypes related to poverty.

Sherman et al. (2013) conducted their replication of affirmation intervention as two longitudinal studies focusing on Latino-American students. Sherman's research found that affirmation exercises helped improve academic performance among Latino American middle school students. Those who participated in the intervention saw better grades, especially in math and science, and avoided the typical decline over the school year compared to the control group. The intervention's effects persisted into high school, suggesting lasting benefits. Affirmed students felt less affected by identity threat, which decoupled daily adversity from academic motivation. The study highlights the potential of affirmations to reduce achievement gaps often associated with identity threat.

Two of the affirmation intervention studies replicated the intervention in large-scale with both African-Americans and Latino-American students. One of these studies conducted by Dee (2015) targeted 2500 participants from six middle schools. However, the study did not replicate all of the findings from the previous study. It did observe a significant reduction in the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students, with a smaller gap for girls. This study also observed the improvement in soft outcomes such as attendance, tardiness, and

disciplinary infractions. The effect of random assignment to the treatment condition was small and insignificant, and it negatively affected the performance of female students.

Another large-scale replication study conducted by Borman et al. (2018) included 1,648 students. This study on affirmation interventions found that these exercises helped reduce achievement gaps in high school by 50%. Minority students in the experimental condition experienced lasting academic benefits from middle school into high school. The intervention was most effective in schools where these students faced greater identity threats, such as being in the minority or having lower academic standing. Additionally, students who fully engaged with the self-affirming writing showed the greatest improvement. The study highlights that the success of self-affirmation interventions depends on both the school context and individual engagement, with implications for reducing achievement gaps at scale.

Two articles examined the effect of recursive distribution of the affirmation intervention. The replication study by Goyer et al. (2017) shows that implementing the affirmation writing assignment multiple times over 1-2 years significantly increased course difficulty, advanced students to more challenging academic tracks near the transition to high school, reduced placement in remedial programs, and increased enrolment in mainstream high schools for Latino-American students, including participation in a selective college readiness program designed for underserved students. African American students showed increased college enrolment, particularly in 4-year colleges, with improved selectivity. However, there was no significant difference in selectivity for white students.

Also, the study Binning et al. (2021) showed the positive effects of repeated affirmation writing exercises implemented throughout middle school on student's academic outcomes. They observed that the affirmation intervention during adolescence helps students overcome challenges and threats commonly encountered in this developmental phase. Their replication differed from the previous studies also in terms of assignment to the groups. Students were divided into two groups based on their group memberships, and according to the level of threat they experienced from negative stereotypes. This model assigns students to different 'threat zones' based on specific psychological experiences. For example, students in higher-threat zones might feel academically inadequate or powerless, while those in lower-threat zones may feel indifferent or overconfident. These zones were determined using validated self-report measures that assess psychological states linked to academic performance, such as feelings of academic importance, self-confidence, or defensiveness. By evaluating where students fell

along the stereotype threat continuum, the study aimed to more accurately reflect the varied impacts of negative stereotypes on students, instead of relying solely on fixed group characteristics. aligning with academic expectations. In terms of academic outcomes, the affirmation did not have significant benefits on GPA in the first two years of middle school, by the last quarter of 8th grade, but students in the affirmation condition had a .29 higher GPA, reflecting a 14% increase compared to students in the control condition. The same authors in an earlier report in 2019, found that the students in experimental condition reduced dramatically the rate of discipline incidents in 8th grade (Binning et al., 2019).

- **Replications of Affirmation intervention in Europe**

As discussed previously, there are notable differences between the minority groups in Europe and the US. Although only three replication studies have tested the effect of affirmation intervention on academic achievement in Europe and UK, these studies differ from their US counterparts, particularly regarding the disadvantaged and stereotyped groups they target, and consequently, the forms of psychological threat they address.

The European replications of affirmation interventions demonstrate diverse applications across different contexts, targeting groups based on immigrant background in a study conducted in Germany and minorities in England. In addition, one study focused on SES as a high stereotype-threat condition, aiming to test if affirmation could reduce the stress and improve the performance. (Hadden et al., 2020) in two replications in England. The outcomes vary, with improvements seen in specific subjects like math (Lokhande & Müller 2019) and in overall academic performance (Celeste et al., 2021). In terms of method the two studies in UK utilized the RCT design, while In Germany the intervention was replicated through a double-blind experiment. As school level both studies replicated Cohen et al. (2006) by targeting seventh grade students of secondary school.

In Germany, students of Turkish and Arab descent, are more frequently subjected to negative achievement-related stereotypes compared to other groups (Lorenz et al., 2016; Tiedemann, 2002). Previous research has demonstrated the detrimental effects of stereotype threat on both students with a Turkish migration background and girls in general in Germany (Froehlich et al., 2016; Keller & Dauenheimer, 2003). Interestingly, Lokhande and Müller (2019), builds on this understanding, examined the affirmation addressing the achievement gap for students facing this double jeopardy—specifically female students who also had a migration background particularly, Turkish or Arab in Germany Their findings showed that the

affirmation writing task was especially beneficial for female immigrant students, particularly those with lower prior math performance. Girls with a Turkish background benefited the most, with a moderate effect, while a small effect was observed for girls in general and for long-term outcomes. They reported a small effect for girls, a moderate effect for Turkish students, and a small effect for the long-term measure. Participants in the affirmation group were more likely to emphasize the importance of chosen values in their essays compared to the control group.

In a replication study by Celeste et al. (2021) in England, the effectiveness of self-affirmation and dual-identity interventions was compared in a diverse school setting. The interventions were presented as potential new school policies, with self-affirmation emphasizing personal values and dual identity affirming both British and ethnic identity. Dual identity refers to the recognition that minority group members have multiple identity options, including ethnic, national, and dual identities (Deaux, 2006). Notably, in educational settings where structural inequalities are present, research has consistently shown that ethnic minorities often prefer and benefit more from recognizing their ethnic heritage alongside their connection to the majority culture, which exemplifies a dual identity approach (Brown & Zagefka, 2011; Sam & Berry, 2010). In this study Black pupils, who identified with both identities, performed better in the dual-identity intervention compared to non-Black pupils in the control condition. Perceived stereotype threat partially mediated this effect, indicating that the dual-identity affirmation was less threatening and led to improved test performance.

However, not all replication studies of the affirmation intervention have been successful. For instance, in US, Protzko and Aronson (2016) found no significant reduction in achievement gaps in their replication, conducted in both an inner-city and a suburban school. Factors such as the intervention being administered by researchers rather than teachers and the limited sample size may have contributed to these results. Similarly, De Jong et al. (2016) in the Netherlands failed to replicate the original findings, possibly due to cultural differences and the focus on older participants and ambivalent stereotypes. These studies highlight that context, and implementation may play a crucial role in the effectiveness of affirmation interventions.

6.4.2 Growth mindset interventions

In the literature included in the present review, some studies tested the efficacy of growth mindset interventions. Only one study, by Yeager et al. (2016), included Canada as a geographical context. All of the studies targeted junior high school students, except for the

most recent replication by Paunesku et al. (2015), which included students from 7th to 10th grade in high school. The students in all the studies were from economically disadvantaged groups, with two studies describing their samples as multiracial (Paunesku et al., 2015) or moderately multiracial, as in the second study by Yeager et al. (2016).

Good et al. (2003) tested the efficacy of growth mindset interventions in reducing the effects of stereotype threat on performance. While Aronson's (2002) initial growth mindset trial used a pen-pal program, Good et al. (2003) employed college students as mentors throughout the school year. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: incremental (growth mindset), attribution, or control. The findings revealed that the intervention significantly improved test performance among minority students, particularly females.

The only longitudinal research in the review was conducted by Blackwell et al. (2007). The researchers conducted two studies to examine the efficacy of a growth mindset intervention. Compared to other trials, in this study, students were taught about the incremental theory by their teacher. In the first study, a mediation model indicated that learning goals, effort beliefs, and adaptive strategies mediated the relationship between implicit theories and academic outcomes, showing increased classroom motivation and halting the decline in math performance compared to the control group. The second study, through a RCT design, demonstrated that the intervention increased motivation in the classroom and successfully halted the decline in mathematics achievement.

Paunesku et al. (2015) assessed the effectiveness of a growth mindset intervention, combining it with a focus on a sense of purpose—helping students see school as a means to achieve personal goals. The intervention targeted low-income, minority high school students, who were randomly assigned to either the growth mindset and sense of purpose conditions or a control condition. In contrast to other replications, students in the experimental condition read an article about brain plasticity and completed writing exercises to reinforce the growth mindset. The study found that the interventions significantly improved the GPA of students at risk of dropping out, and the percentage of students completing core courses with satisfactory grades increased by 6.4 percentage points in the intervention group compared to the control group. The findings were consistent across schools with varied demographics, suggesting that such interventions could be broadly effective across different academic settings.

Lastly, Yeager et al. (2016) assessed the efficacy of a revised growth mindset intervention compared to earlier versions (Aronson et al., 2002; Blackwell et al., 2007; Good et al., 2003; Paunesku et al., 2015). In the revised version, after the reading task, the research team gathered

insights by meeting individually with students, followed by group discussions with 2 to 10 students, and finally piloting the intervention with small groups. Their focus was on refining the intervention to improve academic outcomes during the transition to high school. The researchers conducted two studies: the first study involved minority students in the US and Canada and aimed to increase challenge-seeking behaviour while reducing performance-avoidance goals and fixed-trait attributions. The second study, with a diverse group of US high school students, found the intervention significantly improved GPA, particularly for lower-achieving students, and was more effective than previous versions in boosting grades under routine conditions.

Growth mindset interventions could potentially be enhanced by incorporating peers or role models, who can help reinforce the belief that intelligence is flexible and can be developed. Bandura's social learning theory, which highlights the importance of modeling and the influence of peers, also underpins the idea that role models and social interactions can facilitate learning and behavioral change. However, among the reviewed studies, only Good et al. (2003) directly incorporated peer mentorship as part of the intervention, with college students serving as mentors. In contrast, other studies, such as Yeager et al. (2016) and Paunesku et al. (2015), focused on individual reflection and cognitive exercises (e.g., reading and writing tasks) to instill the growth mindset, without emphasizing peer or role model involvement. This suggests that while peer interaction can be an effective element, growth mindset interventions do not always rely on social modeling and could be expanded to include these dynamics in future studies.

6.4.3 Identity Project interventions

Originally developed and tested for efficacy in the US (Sladek et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, et al., 2018) the Identity Project intervention has been replicated in only a few contexts beyond its initial studies. While one study was conducted in the US its adaptation has also been explored in two European countries, Germany and Italy, focusing particularly on its effects on academic progress and identity exploration.

All the intervention studies served the students at the secondary school. While Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, et al. (2018) and Ceccon et al., (2023) involved the 15 years old students, Juang et al. (2020) conducted the intervention with slightly younger students aged 12. The intervention

in context of US was focused on diverse ethnic racial groups, but the European interventions served the students with migrant background.

The small-scale RCT design study by Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, et al. (2018) were used with an attention control group. The studies involved multiple follow-up intervals (12, 18, and 67 weeks). The primary focus was on both psychological adjustment (self-esteem, depressive symptoms) and academic performance, with clear evidence of improved academic outcomes. It led to increased exploration of ethnic-racial identity, which subsequently resulted in higher levels of identity resolution. In turn, these enhanced levels of resolution were associated with higher global identity cohesion, increased self-esteem, reduced depressive symptoms, and improved academic grades. The study's results provide support for the idea that promoting ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution in adolescents can contribute to positive psychosocial functioning and well-being among youth (Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, et al., 2018).

The replication study by Juang and colleagues et al. (2020) maintained the RCT design but focusing primarily on psychosocial outcomes rather than academic performance. The effect on ethnic-racial identity resolution was not significant, but there were positive effects on identity exploration and self-esteem. Additionally, heritage identity exploration and resolution were positively linked to academic adjustment for both the intervention and control groups, indicating that students with greater clarity about their heritage identity also tended to perform better academically.

Although the study by Ceccon et al. (2023) did not directly investigate academic outcomes, it is mentioned due to its relevance in understanding the broader psychosocial factors that influence migrant students' development. Ceccon et al. (2023) applied a similar intervention design to those in the US and Germany, focusing on multi-ethnic adolescents in Italy. Their findings confirmed the intervention's efficacy in promoting identity exploration, which is a critical factor in the academic and social adjustment of migrant students. By exploring how personal characteristics, such as migration background and environmental sensitivity, moderated the intervention's effectiveness, the study offers valuable insights into the complex interactions that can ultimately affect academic outcomes, even though academic performance was not the primary focus.

In conclusion, the Identity Project (IP) intervention has been replicated in only a few studies, with most focusing on promoting identity exploration rather than directly addressing academic

outcomes. However, adaptations of the program in five European countries (Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Sweden) have offered important insights into how adolescents in pluralistic societies develop their ethnic-racial identities. These adaptations emphasize the importance of considering each country's sociohistorical context and shifting focus from 'race' to migration and foreignness, making the intervention more relevant across diverse cultural settings (Juang et al., 2022). Notably, the Identity Project (IP) intervention has been replicated in only a few studies, with limited focus on academic progress. However, two studies have successfully adapted the IP program in European countries (Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Sweden) to enhance identity exploration and resolution among adolescents with ethnic-racial backgrounds, aligning with global developmental psychology's focus on migration and foreignness (Juang et al., 2022).

6.4.4 Money Incentive Interventions

In the literature reviewed only one study used the monetary incentive interventions in support of achievement gap. the study focused on how financial rewards could support identity development and resiliency and impact the academic performance. Spencer et al. (2005) intervention study examined the impact of monetary incentives on academic performance and psychosocial factors in high-achieving low-income students from diverse minority backgrounds in US. The study involved the high school students who maintained good grades (grade As and grade Bs) in major subjects despite facing poverty. The intervention utilized a bottom-up approach, offering financial rewards to sustain their academic performance. Surveys and interviews assessed factors such as positive self-identity, self-perception learning responsibility, resiliency and attitudes toward academic achievement. Results showed that monetary incentives positively impacted academic retention, with higher rates observed in the group with the monetary incentive. Grade level and responsibility for learning were predictors of academic standing, while ethnicity and gender had no direct effect. School factors (e.g., involvement in extracurricular activities, school environment) also influenced outcomes, as revealed by multilevel analysis. The study highlights the potential of monetary incentives to improve both academic outcomes and psychosocial development in disadvantaged students.

However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of such interventions for immigrant students has not been yet examined.

6.5 Community and Support-Based Interventions

As discussed in previous review in this dissertation, factors related to the student's school, community and environment can significantly impact academic outcomes (e.g., Linde & Löfgren, 1988d; Pivovarova & Powers, 2019; Pomianowicz, 2021; Razfar & Simon, 2011; Reyes & Carrasco, 2018). Addressing these disparities and reducing group-based inequalities in educational outcomes, such as high school graduation and college attendance, remains a critical public policy, economic, and civil rights priority (Lee, 2002; Portes, 2005; Portes & Salas, 2010; Rothstein, 2008). As discussed previously, among the many factors contributing to this challenge, socio-economic stressors and a lack of supportive community resources have been shown to disproportionately affect immigrant and low-income students (e.g., Barban & White, 2011; Heath et al., 2008; Spencer et al., 2002).

Educational researchers have proposed various strategies to address the achievement gap. In particular, early college awareness programs and comprehensive support services have been identified as effective in enhancing student learning, while providing resources for college planning and financial aid information (Pathways to College Network, 2004). Promoting high aspirations throughout middle and high school, improving academic preparation, and ensuring secure financial support for higher education are emphasized as crucial interventions (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2007). Moreover, numerous scholars advocate for targeted interventions aimed at English learners and immigrant students. Practical suggestions for schools and teachers to improve outcomes for English learners include strategies to better support their academic progress (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Gándara, 2002; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Portes, 2005; Rance-Roney, 2009; Reyes et al., 1999; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Valverde, 2006).

Furthermore, programs that help clarify the educational policies for parents and children are essential to ensure students remain on the right academic track (Lockwood, 2000).

A key example of such an initiative is the community school, which is described as “an approach to better coordinate schools with local community resources and social service agencies” (Anderson et al., 2019). Community schools aim to improve educational outcomes by providing necessary supports that foster learning while also emphasizing the connection between the school and the surrounding community. While community schools typically operate at the elementary level, the model has been extended to middle and high school levels in some US cities, such as Oakland and New York (Ammar et al., 2021).

Although community-driven and school-based interventions have shown promise in addressing educational inequities, few studies in this review specifically focus on community support programs for immigrant children. Moreover, the studies that do utilize this approach are exclusively from the US, highlighting a gap in research from other contexts.

6.5.1 Community and school Programs for Immigrant Students

Two studies included in this review focused on community support, concentrating on economically disadvantaged populations. One study focused on the minority students and the other focused on low-income immigrant families, specifically in elementary school settings. Both studies highlight the importance of external support in improving long-term academic outcomes. Cheng and Peterson (2021) employed a school voucher intervention that provided three-year scholarships to low-income families, allowing for greater school choice. This intervention led to a 13 percentage points and improved graduation rates among moderately disadvantaged students. However, the impact on severely disadvantaged students was less pronounced, highlighting the varied effects of financial support based on socio-economic status.

Similarly, Dearing et al. (2016) investigated a support intervention for first-generation immigrant children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in high-poverty urban elementary schools. Their quasi-experimental study demonstrated significant gains in math and reading achievement among participants compared to those who did not receive the intervention. Notably, continued participation in the program correlated with greater academic improvements, emphasizing that sustained engagement with the program correlated with greater academic gains and underscored the need for aligned support services for immigrant children.

Some of the community support interventions discussed in this review employed a multifaceted approach, addressing both academic and non-academic needs to provide comprehensive assistance for students facing socio-economic challenges. A quasi-experimental study by Ammar et al. (2021) utilized a community school model specifically targeting immigrant and refugee newcomers. This long-term intervention was implemented over the entire three-year period of middle school, during which the school served as a hub for academic and non-academic services, providing comprehensive support for students' academic, social, emotional, and health needs. Supports included English language programs, career advising, adult

education, and assistance with navigating their new environment. Students in the community school outperformed the comparison group and had fewer course failures in grade 8, suggesting that wrap-around services can help reduce the literacy learning gap.

Expanding on the theme of multifaceted community support interventions, two short term interventions focused on high school students. One study by Matthews and Mellom (2012) examined a short-term comprehensive community support program targeting high school students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. This multifaceted approach evaluated a 4-week summer enrichment program specifically designed for English-learning students. The intervention aimed to improve academic English language skills, enhance science achievement, and foster aspirations for higher education. The program included activities to increase students' engagement in school life and promote community building, emphasizing the importance of peer relationships in academic achievement. Additionally, the program incorporated follow-up activities and tailored teaching methods throughout the school year. Results indicated increased college aspirations, enrolment in advanced courses, and the formation of peer support networks, demonstrating the positive impact of short-term interventions on academic achievement and the achievement gap.

Parchment et al. (2016) evaluated the Step-Up program, a year-long intervention for high school students addressing academic and emotional challenges tied to socio-economic stressors. Group activities and counselling improved communication, stress management, and decision-making skills, with the Life Skills component linked to higher GPAs; however, its impact on immigrant students remains untested

6.6 Relational interventions

Given the established importance of social capital and supportive relationships in shaping students' academic outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Pianta, 1999; Perreira et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 1994; Sarason et al., 1990), interventions designed to foster and strengthen these relationships have become a key focus in addressing educational disparities. For immigrant students, particularly those facing disruptions such as family separations and adjustments during migration, fostering positive relationships with teachers, peers, and mentors is crucial for bridging the gap between home and school environments (Green et al., 2008; Rhodes, 2002; Roffman et al., 2003; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). These relationships play an essential role in promoting both well-being and academic performance.

However, as previously discussed in the present dissertation, teacher bias also plays a pivotal role in shaping the academic experiences of immigrant students, particularly regarding tracking decisions. Students' academic tracks are influenced by the students' immigrant or minority backgrounds. These students often receiving less favourable recommendations than their native peers, even when their academic performance was comparable (e.g., Glock et al., 2013).

Relational interventions aim to address these inequities by strengthening the relationships between teachers, parents, and students. These interventions emphasize fostering trust, shared goals, and high expectations, which can counteract the effects of bias and support immigrant students in achieving their full academic potential. The following section will explore the role of relational interventions in promoting positive interactions between teachers, parents, and immigrant students to enhance their academic outcomes.

6.6.1 Relational Strategies in the US and Italy

The three studies reviewed emphasize the critical impact of student relationships on academic outcomes. While these studies targeted economically disadvantaged students, Borgna et al. (2022) and Duque (1995) focused on immigrant students, and Gehlbach et al. (2016) studied ethnic minorities. Two of the studies centered on improving teacher-student relationships (TSRs).

In Borgna et al.'s (2022) study, teachers guided immigrant students in Italy to make informed educational track choices at the end of middle school. This quasi-experimental study aimed to reduce disparities by providing information and fostering reflection on academic strengths and goals. Teachers played a pivotal role in challenging stereotypes, setting high expectations, and offering guidance, helping immigrant students make choices aligned with their abilities, thus reducing the risk of being placed in less ambitious tracks.

Similarly, Gehlbach et al. (2016), in the US, conducted a randomized field experiment to improve TSRs by identifying shared similarities between teachers and students. This approach notably benefited underserved students, reducing the achievement gap by over 60%.

Duque (1995) focused on supporting immigrant students with limited English proficiency from low-income families in the US. The intervention, focusing on students from kindergarten through eighth grade, aimed to improve English language skills, math, and science performance through teacher training and parent engagement. While it succeeded in developing students'

English skills and enhancing staff and parent involvement, it fell short in achieving its objectives in mathematics.

6.7 Discussion

The present narrative review aimed to identify the interventions and best practices designed and tested in Western countries. To ensure a more precise and systematic approach, the PRISMA guidelines were followed. This systematized procedure led to a final pool of 33 studies. The findings of the review were heterogeneous findings with variations observed in the school level and the origin of participants, factors and the specific focus of the intervention. The interventions included in this review were categorized into three broad types: Psychological, Relational, and Community and School Support. These categories reflect the primary focus of each intervention, targeting various needs and the factors to manipulate or influence to reduce the achievement gap.

In the following section the key issues across the categories of interventions are discussed. We examined how various interventions addressed different student characteristics and needs, including the influence of socio-economic status, cultural factors, and psychological barriers. Additionally, we focused on how the effectiveness of interventions varied depending on school level, the specific immigrant populations targeted, and the broader educational contexts in which the interventions were implemented. By analyzing these factors, this discussion aimed to provide insights into intervention effectiveness highlighting areas for further research.

6.7.1 Interventions Targeting Specific Populations

Overall, the studies included in the present review predominantly focused on specific populations such as low-SES students (e.g., Cheng & Peterson, 2021), minority or immigrant students, and linguistically disadvantaged students (e.g., Borgna et al., 2022; Celeste et al., 2021), and those facing stereotype threat (e.g., Lokhande & Muller, 2019; See et al., 2022) all of which aim to address the achievement gap. However, despite the increasing presence of immigrant students in educational systems, there is a notable gap in interventions specifically targeting their achievement (e.g., Ammar et al., 2021; Borgna et al., 2022; Juang et al., 2020). The majority of the literature is concentrated on ethnic minorities or racial disparities, with relatively few studies addressing the distinct challenges faced by immigrant students, such as language barriers, cultural adaptation, and integration into new educational systems.

Immigrant youth often navigate a complex set of difficulties, including economic hardship, xenophobia, language barriers, acculturative stress, family separation, and under-resourced neighbourhoods and schools. These factors can hinder their ability to navigate the educational system, often placing them on a downward trajectory (Coll & Marks, 2012; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Future research should prioritize designing and evaluating interventions specifically tailored to immigrant students, considering their specific needs and barriers.

Moreover, as noted in previous chapters, the achievement gap is shaped by various factors such as country of origin, socioeconomic status, family background, self-esteem, and educational aspirations (Portes & Hao, 2004). Peer groups and social networks also influence students' access to educational resources and their attitudes toward education (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Jewell, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). Many of these groups usually encounter multiple, overlapping challenges that need to be addressed concurrently.

However, in the reviewed literature, there was a notable lack of interventions that addressed a combination of these barriers. Only few studies tackled multiple issues, providing different types of support such as psychological, financial, linguistical (e.g., Dearing et al., 2016; Matthews & Mellom, 2012), still less interventions addressed not only the students themselves but also the families (Ammar et al., 2021). This suggests a critical gap in existing interventions, because most programs focus on addressing isolated factors of academic achievement gap without considering the interconnected nature of the barriers that students face.

Addressing a single challenge, like low socioeconomic status or language barriers, is often insufficient for students also facing psychological or relational issues, such as stereotype threat or lack of family support. A more holistic approach that tackles multiple, interconnected factors. Combining educational, emotional, social, and financial support, and involving families and communities may be more effective in supporting immigrant and disadvantaged students' academic success.

The implications of these findings highlight the importance of developing comprehensive interventions that simultaneously tackle multiple challenges. Such approaches would better reflect the complexity of the factors underlying the achievement gap and potentially yield more sustainable and impactful outcomes. Future research and policy efforts should focus on designing and evaluating multi-dimensional interventions that address both individual and systemic barriers.

6.7.2 Interventions Across Different School Levels

The interventions included in this review are primarily concentrated at the secondary school level, with a particular focus on high school. Additionally, the emphasis on psychological interventions during this stage highlights the critical importance of addressing the diverse challenges students face during this key developmental period. This focus reflects the importance of adolescence as a key developmental stage, namely middle adolescence, typically spanning ages 13 to 17 a period marked by rapid physical, emotional, and social changes, but without full adjustment to these transformations or recognition as an adult (Yeager et al., 2017). This period begins with puberty and culminates in the transition to an adult role in society (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Crone & Dahl, 2012; Steinberg, 2014).

School interventions like Growth Mindset, affirmation, and identity projects highlight the crucial role of students' interactions within the school environment in shaping their academic outcomes. These programs highlight that personal development and identity formation are deeply intertwined with social dynamics. The drive for self-integrity—seeing oneself as good, virtuous, and efficacious—is a fundamental human motivation (Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988), and membership in valued social groups often plays a crucial role in this sense of self-integrity (Cohen, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To sustain school success, students must identify with academic achievement as a core part of their self-definition, making them accountable to it and the social environment surrounding them (Steele, 1997). (Steel, 1997). There is a need for more intervention studies focusing specifically on high school students in Europe, especially programs that incorporate social dynamics and identity formation to enhance self-integrity and academic achievement.

Furthermore, the few relational interventions and community support were mainly concentrated at the middle school level. These programs focused on fostering better peer relationships (e.g., Matthews & Mellom, 2012) and improving teacher-student interactions (e.g., Borgna et al., 2016; Gehlbach et al., 2016). This focus aligns with evidence highlighting the critical role peers play in identity development and emotional support during early adolescence, a period when peer acceptance has a particularly strong influence on academic achievement (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Gallaro & Barrasa, 2016). More relational intervention studies are needed to explore how improving peer and teacher-student relationships can enhance the academic experiences of students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds.

In contrast, interventions at the elementary school level are less common in the reviewed studies but tend to focus on building foundational relationships. One notable example is a relational intervention that emphasizes both teacher and parent involvement, targeting younger students in elementary and middle school (Duque, 1995). This intervention recognizes the critical role that both teachers and parents play in early education, setting the stage for students' academic and social success as they transition into adolescence. Research supports this approach, indicating that parental support behaviour significantly contributes to children's motivational and achievement-related development (Pomerantz et al., 2007). The expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation further underscores the importance of parental behaviours in fostering students' achievement motivation, suggesting that both parent-perceived and child-perceived parental support are vital for enhancing children's academic outcomes (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Given the lack of intervention studies in elementary education, more research is needed that integrates teacher and parental involvement. These interventions can build strong foundational relationships, crucial for boosting motivation and academic success, especially for immigrant students as they transition into adolescence.

6.7.3 Interventions Across Different National Contexts

The achievement gap, as noted, in the US, is often intertwined with racial disparities, frequently linked to challenges such as discrimination and stereotype threat (e.g., Parchment et al., 2016; Protzko & Aronson, 2016). Many interventions, such as affirmations (Cohen et al., 2006), growth mindset programs (Aronson et al., 2002), and identity projects (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017), are specifically designed to address the social challenges faced by these students, which can significantly impact their academic outcomes. In the case of immigrant students and English learners, it is not always possible to clearly distinguish generational status, as some ethnic minority groups, like Latinos, are also categorized as language learners (e.g., Duque, 1995).

In contrast, there is a limited number of intervention studies conducted in Europe (e.g., Celeste et al., 2021; de Jong et al., 2016; Juang et al., 2020). The structural differences between US and European educational systems significantly affect the implementation and effectiveness of interventions for migrant students. Key disparities include preschool enrolment rates, Europe's rigid early tracking compared to the flexible high school system in the US, overrepresentation of migrant students in special education, and socio-economic segregation (Heckmann, 2008).

For example, in Italy, interventions for immigrant students are often combined with programs designed to ease their academic tracking into higher levels of education (Borgna et al., 2022). Unlike interventions in more flexible systems, these programs are tailored to address challenges stemming from delayed enrollment, and the integration of students, and varying levels of language proficiency. Additionally, the socio-economic context and support structures, such as welfare systems and community networks, and immigration processes shape both impact of these efforts (Heckmann, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 2017; West & Nikolai, 2013).

Given these differences, there is a pressing need for more intervention studies in the context of the UK and especially across Europe, where the educational systems, immigration patterns, and socio-cultural environments differ significantly from those in the US. Future studies should prioritize the development and evaluation of interventions that are culturally relevant and responsive to the specific needs of these students, thereby fostering their academic achievement and a better inclusion.

6.7.4 Evaluation of Effectiveness in Intervention Studies

Among the reviewed studies, various methodological approaches were employed. Experimental designs, such as randomized controlled trials, were frequently used to assess short-term outcomes like improved test scores or course taking (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Kornienko, et al., 2018), while others utilized more robust double-blind field experiments (e.g., Purdi-Vaughn et al., 2009). These approaches provided evidence supporting the potential effectiveness of certain strategies. However, not all of studies employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs yielded significant results. Some studies faced challenges demonstrating effectiveness due to issues with comparison group selection and the confounding effects involving students from positively stereotyped groups with overlapping stereotypes related to socioeconomic status (Bowen et al., 2013). Others reported limited success when applying interventions in cultural contexts different from those in which they were originally developed (De Jong et al., 2016) or when constrained by sample size and variations in the core conditions of the replicated intervention (Protzko & Aronson, 2016).

In addition, successful large-scale evaluations were identified across the literature. For example, Borman et al. (2018) and Dee (2015) conducted broad assessments that demonstrated the efficacy of interventions under specific conditions. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the contextual factors and implementation conditions that enhance the success of interventions aimed at reducing the academic achievement gap. Moreover, longitudinal

studies, though less common, provided insights into the sustained impact of interventions over time (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007; Sherman et al., 2013).

This review indicated that interventions some studies used also qualitative approaches. For instance, among Growth mindset interventions the only study one study used qualitative approach. Yeager et al. (2016a) initially employed incorporated a qualitative component involving non-participatory observations to assess the content, delivery, and dynamics of guidance sessions, focusing on the behaviours and interactions of key actors such as teachers, students, and guidance counsellors. However, a notable gap remains in the limited use of comprehensive mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative outcomes with qualitative insights into student experiences. Such combined methods could provide a richer understanding of both the mechanisms behind intervention success and the lived experiences of participants.

In addition, while a few qualitative studies have been conducted to evaluate large-scale programs at the national or state level, these were not included in the present review due to the unavailability of full data. Examples include Kessler (2018), who evaluated a curriculum, instruction, and assessment program's impact on student academic achievement, and Beecher and Sweeny (2008), who assessed enrichment and differentiated instruction as part of a teaching and learning paradigm. This exclusion criterion reflects the focus of this review on studies where data and detailed analyses were accessible for in-depth comparison.

Overall, the review highlights both the strengths and limitations of current intervention studies, emphasizing the importance of addressing methodological gaps in order to better assess their effectiveness. Future research should focus on incorporating more mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to offer a more comprehensive evaluation of intervention outcomes and their long-term impact on immigrant students' academic achievement.

6.7.5 Contribution, Strengths, and Limitations of the Study

This review makes a valuable contribution to understanding interventions addressing the academic achievement gap among immigrant students, offering an inclusive, multi-contextual analysis that spans both US and European educational systems, including Italy. By synthesizing interventions implemented across diverse sociocultural and educational contexts, the study highlights both shared challenges and region-specific strategies. It offers a broad geographical scope that highlights differences and commonalities in addressing the academic disparities faced by immigrant students.

One key strength of this review is its comprehensive scope, examining intervention studies from elementary school through higher education, capturing the continuity of academic challenges and support needs throughout students' educational trajectories. Unlike reviews restricted to specific time frames, this analysis spans interventions across multiple decades, capturing both historical and contemporary strategies. Additionally, it encompasses the entire school journey from elementary through higher education, reflecting the continuity of academic challenges and supports over time. The interdisciplinary nature of the studies reviewed, drawing from education, psychology, and sociology, further enriches the findings by integrating diverse perspectives and methodological approaches.

However, synthesizing and analysing a broad range of intervention studies addressing the academic achievement gap poses several challenges. The diversity in study designs, methodologies, and the varying populations and contexts involved made it difficult to establish consistent categorizations or draw clear, comparable conclusions. This complexity is particularly evident when attempting to analyse how different factors such as socio-economic status, language barriers, and relational dynamics, interact across distinct educational settings. While this review offers insights into both the US and European educational systems, the predominance of research from the US highlights a significant gap in European studies, particularly those focused on immigrant students.

The challenge of addressing the academic achievement gap among immigrant students was compounded by the scarcity of interventions specifically targeting this group in Europe. As a result, we had to broaden our scope to include interventions aimed at ethnic minorities, which sometimes overlap with racial groups, thereby addressing the racial achievement gap. This overlap, while offering some insights, also presents limitations in fully understanding the unique challenges immigrant students face and the practices for narrowing the gap.

The scarcity of empirical data on intervention strategies within the European context limits our understanding of the unique needs of immigrant students and restricts the identification of culturally relevant, evidence-based interventions that could be effectively adapted across diverse educational systems.

Furthermore, many existing studies and interventions tend to address isolated factors, such as socio-economic status or language barriers, without considering the interaction between multiple predictors that influence academic outcomes. The complex nature of the achievement

gap calls for a more integrated approach that examines the interplay of socio-economic, community, relational, and psychological factors.

Additionally, the lack of long-term evaluation mechanisms for many interventions limits our ability to understand their sustained impact. Without rigorous, longitudinal research, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of strategies aimed at improving academic performance and reducing dropout rates among immigrant students. Future research should prioritize comprehensive program evaluations to ensure that educational interventions are not only well-designed but also systematically monitored and adapted to meet the evolving needs of disadvantaged students.

6.8 Conclusions

This narrative review utilized a systematized method to investigate the interventions and practices aimed at narrowing the academic achievement gap in Western countries focusing on immigrant students. The findings were heterogeneous, and the identified intervention studies were organized into three distinct groups. To maintain coherence with the previous studies in this dissertation, the intervention studies were classified into categories encompassing psychological, relational, and community and school support interventions. This classification provides a structured lens through which to examine the diverse strategies applied across educational systems.

Psychological interventions, particularly those addressing stereotype and identity threats, constituted the largest share of studies, focusing mainly on high school students. Despite the well-documented importance of student relationships in academic achievement, relational interventions were notably underrepresented.

Furthermore, interventions addressing the interaction of multiple factors, such as socio-economic status, relational dynamics, and language barriers, remain scarce. This gap highlights the need for more holistic and tailored strategies that better reflect the multifaceted experiences of immigrant students.

Although this study utilized disciplinary databases like ERIC, PsycInfo, and an interdisciplinary source like Scopus, the number of studies focusing on educational interventions remains limited. This may be due to a predominant emphasis on developing intercultural competencies in teachers and educators in Education field. This focus is typically addressed through formal training programs and standardized courses or modules in teacher

preparation programs, rather than through targeted interventions directly addressing the academic achievement of immigrant students. This disciplinary orientation should be considered when interpreting the observed gaps in the reviewed literature.

The predominance of US-based studies in this review may reflect both the broader research tradition in that context, and the inclusion criteria utilized in this study. Additionally, linguistic interventions, while critical, were beyond the scope of this analysis.

By integrating perspectives from both US and European contexts, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of how the achievement gap can be narrowed, stressing the importance of context-specific interventions. The review emphasized the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of interventions through rigorous methodological designs. While several studies employed experimental and quasi experimental approaches to assess outcomes, challenges related to sample size, cultural transferability, and comparison group selection often constrained the generalizability of results. Large-scale evaluations illustrate conditions under which interventions are most effective, highlighting the critical role of contextual factors in shaping their impact. Additionally, longitudinal and mixed-method approaches can enhance future research efforts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of both immediate and sustained intervention outcome.

This chapter aimed to gather and propose effective practices for future programs designed to narrow the academic achievement gap among immigrant students. Effective interventions are vital not only for promoting academic success but also for enhancing social cohesion and economic productivity. Advancing evidence-based practices will contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society. The next chapter will discuss these findings in conjunction with the other results of this dissertation.

Chapter 7

7. Discussion and conclusion

7.1 Overview of results of the thesis

The number of immigrants and their children is rapidly increasing in many European and North American countries (United Nations [UN], 2020). This demographic shift has drawn attention to the 'achievement gap,' which underscores disparities in academic progress between native students and those with an immigrant background (Azzolini & Ress, 2015; OECD, 2016). The achievement gap is evident across various dimensions, including grades, standardized test scores, course selections, dropout rates, and college completion rates.

When transitioning to secondary school, immigrant students often select less challenging educational tracks, a choice that increases their likelihood of achieving lower academic outcomes after completing compulsory education (Borgna, 2022). In Italy, official data reveal that migrant students frequently encounter challenges such as delays in their studies, academic underperformance, decreased likelihood of completing their education, higher dropout rates, and a preference for less university-oriented educational tracks (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020, 2023).

My approach addressed the three identified gaps by integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, examining individual, relational, and contextual factors, and reviewing interventions in the literature relevant to the unique challenges faced by immigrant students in Western countries, with a specific focus on Italy.

This project aimed to address key gaps in the literature by focusing on two main objectives. The first objective was to explore the underlying factors contributing to the academic achievement gap among immigrant students born both in Italy and abroad, including academic performance and track choice. The second objective was to identify effective interventions to reduce the achievement gap.

To achieve the first goal, three studies in present research explored the underlying factors contributing to the academic achievement gap among immigrant students born both in destination country and abroad.

This section aims to briefly summarize and discuss the key findings from each study and highlight the logical connections between them, with a focus on common themes. The goal is

to set the stage for the discussion by selecting the most salient findings and examining them across the studies. By drawing connections between the studies, I aim to address overarching insights that inform the broader understanding of the achievement gap and effective interventions. Below, the key findings from each study, are outlined, emphasizing those that will be central to the subsequent discussion.

Study 1 overviewed the literature of Western countries in order to identify the factors associated with academic outcomes (academic performance, academic track choice and academic attainment) among students with immigrant background. This systematized narrative review analyzed a total of 132 research studies, which provided insights about different types of factors. Six categories of factors were identified: Socio-economic Factors, Socio-cultural Factors, Relational Factors, Psychological and Behavioral Factors, Student Characteristics, and Community and Environment. Among these, socio-economic and socio-cultural factors have been the most extensively explored, while relatively few studies have focused on individual and psychological aspects. Despite the large number of studies, most focused on isolated factors and few analyzing the interaction between different factors and only a limited number employing a Mixed-method approach.

Next, two empirical studies focused on lower secondary school pupils. A qualitative study (Study 2) used focus groups and semi-structured interviews to investigate the challenges, resources and relationships influencing academic track choices and long-term educational orientations, as well as the academic performance of students with immigrant background in Italy. Therefore, the qualitative study explored the firsthand experiences of third-grade students engaged in the orientation process, their head teachers, and their guidance counselor, in a lower secondary school of Verona. The study aimed to collect data and gather knowledge about the factors and insight obtained through the review study. The findings aligned with both national and international reports, as the students' narratives revealed that those more inclined toward lyceums were predominantly native Italian. In contrast, immigrant students primarily expressed their preference for vocational schools, followed by technical institutions. Although findings were majorly in line with what was present in literature, the study provided a deeper insight about the previous findings and indicated the multifaceted and interrelated nature of the challenges and resources which shape the orientation and educational experience especially among immigrant students specifically in context of Italy. However, this qualitative study is focused on specific population involved in the study providing context-specific insights rather than aiming for generalizability.

The factors identified through the first and second studies, in association with academic track choice and academic performance, were quantitatively examined in, (Study 3) a correlational study in lower secondary schools in Verona. To enhance the validity of the findings, this study utilized multiple data sources and methods, including the second- and third-grade students from lower secondary schools and their parents. We involved parents in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the role of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors in the achievement gap. The findings of the correlational study aligned with the findings of the qualitative study. The results revealed disparities in performance in math and Italian between native Italian students; moreover, students with two immigrant parents were more likely to be recommended by teachers for vocational tracks and less likely for lyceum.

The correlational study supported the role of socioeconomic and socio-cultural factors in academic outcomes and found a marginally significant relationship between self-esteem and performance, as well as some relational factors. However, no significant difference was found for immigrant students and Italian students regarding academic achievement.

To achieve the second objective of the research project, identifying effective interventions aimed at reducing this achievement gap, a narrative systematized review analyzed interventions aimed at reducing the academic achievement gap for immigrant students in Western countries. Strangely, despite the rich literature investigating the factors of achievement gap particularly among immigrant students, only few intervention studies have been effective in closing the gap. Especially a minor number of interventions were conducted in the European context. This restricted literature led us to include US studies designed for ethnic minorities, which often overlap with racial groups, making it difficult to fully understand the unique challenges faced by immigrant students. Findings of this dissertation added to the existing knowledge about the intervention studies primarily focused on adolescence, underscoring the importance of this developmental stage in shaping individuals' future educational and professional perspectives (Yeager et al., 2018). However the limited number of included studies mainly addressed stereotype threat, which was less studied in literature about the factors. Yet few studies served relational factors or intersectional factors or long-term evaluation of the interventions.

In the following pages, the findings of the research are summarized, compared, and discussed in relation to the objectives outlined at the outset of the study.

7.2 Factors Contributing to The Achievement Gap

The findings across the first three studies deepened our understanding of the factors contributing to the academic achievement gap among students with immigrant backgrounds,

specifically in Italy. The factors discussed in the following pages include socio-economic status (SES), family-related factors, relational factors (such as parental, peer, and teacher support, as well as expectations), psychological factors (including self-esteem and motivation for social redemption), language proficiency, cultural maintenance, acculturation, and cultural identity.

The literature consistently highlights the strong role of socio-economic status (SES) and family-related factors in contributing to the achievement gap among immigrant students. Studies consistently showed that higher SES, measured by family income, parental education, is linked to better academic outcomes (Figlio et al., 2017). Family structure—such as the number of siblings and the presence of parents—also plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic performance (e.g., Hou & Zhang, 2015; Figlio et al., 2017). What is particularly striking in this context is the way these factors are interwoven with the opportunities available to students. For instance, financial constraints not only limit access to high-performing schools but can also narrow students' educational aspirations. This is evident in findings of the qualitative study, where students with lower SES were more likely to pursue non-university tracks, and in some cases, even lacked the support to aim for the excel high schools. Family structure, too, appeared to influence the academic performance among the students involved in this study. The correlational study reinforced these findings, about socio-economic dynamics, showing its relationship with student's tracking.

In Italy, families with at least one foreign member have an absolute poverty rate of 34.1% (331,000 families), rising to 41.4% for families composed solely of foreigners with children, five times higher than the 8.2% rate for Italian-only families with children (ISTAT, 2024). Despite immigrants' crucial contributions to key sectors and the economy, they often face overqualification, underemployment, and limited access to social benefits (ISTAT, 2023). Policies aimed at reducing poverty, enhancing access to quality education, and supporting families, such as increasing financial aid, promoting parental education, and addressing structural inequities in school placement, are essential to mitigate these disparities.

The issue of segregation and marginalization among immigrant students in Italy, driven by mobility between home and school (Cordini et al., 2019) underscores how structural barriers intersect with educational inequalities. In the qualitative study limited parental access to driving licenses and reliance on public transportation shaped student's track choices based on geographical proximity rather than student's academic potential. As these limitations on driving opportunities are often tied to time-consuming and costly bureaucratic processes, facilitating policies could help address such issues. Additionally, a comparative look at

international approaches, such as United States, community-level programs such as HOPE VI have been illustrates how place-based interventions can mitigate socio-economic segregation (Coley et al., 2023). These initiatives focus on improving the neighborhood by reducing concentrated poverty, and enhancing economic opportunities and housing quality, through targeted financial investments. Such programs support tackle the root causes of educational disparity.

Findings of the qualitative study aligned with the literature. The relationship with parents, peers and teachers were presented both as a resource (e.g., Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Govaris et al., 2021; Malecki & Demaray, 2006) and at times as a challenge (Glock et al., 2013; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). The narratives revealed parents' and teachers' expectations and aspirations, sometimes misaligned with student's own aspirations or biased. In some cases, these figures lacked the support that students needed, and peers and siblings replaced them as sources of support. Peers, like friends and classmates emerged as figures who replace the adult's interaction and support in case of their absence or perception of lack of adult's engagement. Notably these findings showed that the peers experience seems to help the students envisioning the future educational journey. Even though the correlational study did not find direct links between perceived support from parents, teachers and peers and the achievement gap, the study suggested the nuanced role these relationships play. Relational dynamics may exert their influence through indirect pathways, such as shaping aspirations, self-efficacy, and school engagement. Schools and communities can help bridge academic pathway gaps by equipping parents with tools to navigate the educational system, enabling informed decisions and reducing reliance on peers who may influence unsuitable aspirations. Teacher training programs should prioritize culturally responsive practices and equitable guidance to minimize biases and support immigrant students. Promoting positive teacher-student interactions and providing balanced feedback can enhance academic performance and guide students towards pathways that align with their potential and aspirations.

The qualitative study illuminated the significant role of teachers' perceptions of parental engagement play in shaping teachers' recommendation for students' educational trajectories. Teachers often consider the level of parental engagement recommending academic tracks, a practice that aligns with broader research linking limited parental support to higher dropout risks (Rumberger, 1995). However, this approach raises concerns about reinforcing structural inequities. By steering students from less supportive family backgrounds toward vocational or less demanding tracks, teachers may unintentionally perpetuate reduced opportunities for social mobility. This underscores the need to critically examine how implicit biases, and

contextual constraints influence track placement decisions. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address disparities rooted in parental engagement. Schools could implement bridge programs that offer academic support and counseling to at-risk students, helping to compensate for limited family support. Additionally, professional development initiatives should focus on equity training for teachers, encouraging them to evaluate students' potential beyond family background and avoid reinforcing educational inequities. Finally, biased audits of track recommendations could ensure that placement decisions prioritize students' abilities and aspirations, rather than perceptions of their familial circumstances.

Psychological and relational factors, such as well-being, depression, and anxiety, remain under-researched in the context of immigrant students' academic achievement. The literature review highlighted a notable gap in understanding the role of self-concept shaping academic outcomes (Lauermann et al., 2020). Although prior research has established correlations between self-esteem and academic performance, a clear causal relationship has yet to be determined. Most existing studies focus on how educational tracking influences self-esteem rather than the reverse, limiting our understanding of whether higher self-esteem can actively shape track placements and academic success (Houtte et al., 2012; Kelly, 1975). Findings of correlational study added new insight to this discussion. Higher self-esteem increased the students' perception of likelihood of being recommended to more ambitious tracks, such as lyceums among immigrant students. This finding suggests that self-esteem may shape students' self-efficacy and confidence in interpreting teacher feedback or recommendations, reinforcing their belief in their academic potential. However, despite this association, self-esteem had no significant effect on students' track choices or performance outcomes. This raises important questions about the mechanisms through which self-esteem operates within the broader framework of academic decision-making and its potential to reduce disparities between immigrant and native students. These results highlight several key points. First, the gap between perceived recommendations and students' track choice underscores the complex interaction between psychological factors and structural constraints. Even when students with higher self-esteem feel capable of pursuing more ambitious tracks, it seems that external influences, such as socioeconomic limitations, teacher biases, or parental expectations, often drive final placement decisions. This emphasizes the importance of understanding how self-esteem interacts with broader determinants. Second, effective interventions must simultaneously foster self-esteem and address systemic barriers. Boosting self-esteem alone may be insufficient without reducing biases in track recommendations, strengthening teacher-student relationships, and improving access to resources. Lastly, future research should explore

how self-esteem interacts with structural factors and influences key academic decisions. Understanding its role in shaping adaptive strategies can guide policies that integrate psychological support with systemic reforms to reduce disparities.

Research on students of immigrant origin highlights their ability to turn migration-related challenges into educational opportunities. Educational autobiographies demonstrate that migration can enhance non-cognitive skills, like resilience, enabling students to navigate difficulties and achieve academic success (Santangati, 2018). Interestingly, an additional finding of the qualitative study is the significant role of social redemption as a motivational factor for immigrant students. Specifically, many students from immigrant backgrounds view their educational success as a means to overcome their family's past socio-economic struggles and improve their future prospects. In line with this, some head teachers noted that immigrant students tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation compared to their Italian peers, driven by the desire for social and economic improvement through education. These students often see their academic success as not only a personal achievement but also a means to elevate their families' socio-economic status and overcome challenges associated with migration. Fostering a supportive learning environment that reinforces the value of education as a means for upward social mobility could enhance motivation and achievement, benefiting both the students and their families.

Language proficiency is a critical factor, acting as both a bridge and a barrier to academic success. Research highlights its role in transforming aspirations into academic achievement, with frequent use of the destination language linked to higher aspirations and improved metacognitive skills (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2020; Tseng, 2006). The qualitative study identified systemic challenges and linguistic barriers, that hinder equitable educational opportunities for immigrant students. Guidance counselor and head teachers emphasized that limited Italian proficiency delays curriculum engagement and strongly influences high school placement, often restricting immigrant students' choices and limiting access to tracks aligned with their aspirations and potential. This finding suggests that language proficiency significantly influences both the academic success of immigrant students and their access to educational opportunities. Biases in guidance practices, tied to language limitations, and inadequate support further exacerbate inequities. Addressing these challenges through language development programs and inclusive policies, as seen in countries like Switzerland, can help promote multilingualism, enhance school-parent relationships, and improve educational opportunities for immigrant students especially for newcomers (CIDREE, 2009;

Eurydice, 2023). Ultimately, tackling language barriers and biases is essential for promoting equity in education.

Studies have examined the relationship between cultural maintenance, acculturation, and academic achievement among immigrant students. Portes (1999) found that preserving one's original culture and higher levels of acculturation were negatively associated with academic outcomes. Guerra et al. (2019) noted that perceived discrimination increased the desire for cultural maintenance, indirectly affecting school performance. The qualitative study emphasized fostering an inclusive environment that supports cultural identity expression, as such climates can shape students' educational choices. However, the correlational study found no significant links between identity-related factors, such as exploration and resolution, and academic track decisions or performance. Further research is needed to better understand the complex relationship between cultural identity and academic outcomes, particularly in the context of immigrant students' experiences.

To conclude, the three studies in this project collectively highlighted the multifaceted nature of the achievement gap among immigrant students. Socio-economic status, family-related factors, and relational dynamics were found to significantly influence academic outcomes, often compounding existing disparities. Language proficiency emerged as an important determinant, shaping both students' academic performance and their access to educational opportunities. Additionally, psychological factors, such as self-esteem, motivation, and resilience, played a critical role in influencing students' academic trajectories. These findings suggest that addressing the achievement gap requires a comprehensive approach and policies that integrate psychological support with efforts to reduce socio-economic and relational barriers.

7.3 Effective Interventions

The interventions identified in Study 4 reveal both progress and significant gaps when compared to the systemic challenges documented in Studies 1, 2, and 3, particularly those observed among immigrant students. The interventions predominantly target the secondary school level, corresponding to the tracking age in Italy, which was the focus of our study.

The challenges identified among immigrant students include substantial socioeconomic barriers, such as lower family income, limited parental education, and constrained access to university-oriented educational tracks. Language proficiency emerged as a critical obstacle, delaying curriculum engagement and influencing school placement decisions. Furthermore, relational factors like teacher biases limited parental involvement, and inconsistent peer support were highlighted as pivotal challenges. However, despite the increasing presence of

immigrant students in educational systems, there is a notable gap in interventions specifically targeting their achievement. Few programs concentrated on linguistic barriers (e.g., Ammar et al., 2021; Borgna et al., 2022; Juang et al., 2020).

Most of the interventions analyzed in Study 4 primarily targeted psychological barriers, such as stereotype threat (e.g., Lokhande & Muller, 2019). Numerous interventions, including affirmations (Cohen et al., 2006), growth mindset initiatives (Aronson et al., 2002), and identity development programs (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), aimed to tackle the social challenges that significantly influence these students' academic performance. These findings aligned with the results from the three first studies highlighting how stereotype threat, and ethnic bias shape students' academic aspirations and educational opportunities. Although these social psychological challenges are not the primary determinants of the gap, they emerged as well-documented factors in the literature review of Study 1 (e.g., Froehlich et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2015) and were further reinforced by the qualitative study, where they were identified as important contributors to educational disparities.

However, a clear mismatch exists between the interventions' focus areas and the challenges identified for immigrant students. While psychological elements, such as self-esteem and identity struggles, are relevant, were less directly linked to academic outcomes like grade point averages or track selection, although these interventions are valuable for boosting confidence and reducing bias, they fall short of directly tackling socioeconomic disadvantages or linguistic barriers, which are more critical for immigrant students, particularly in Italy.

Similarly, though factors related to relationships with teachers and teacher attitudes emerged in all three studies as having a critical role in students' academic achievement, especially in the Italian context, few relational interventions were identified in the reviewed studies. Among these, only two interventions specifically targeted the teacher-student relationship. One intervention in context of Italy, focused on a particularly relevant issue in Italy where track choice significantly affects future opportunities. The intervention was designed to enhance teachers' awareness of their influence on students' track recommendations, aiming to reduce bias and promote equitable guidance in educational placement decisions (Borgna et al., 2022). Another intervention sought to strengthen teacher-student communication to foster trust and support, thereby improving students' academic engagement and performance (Gehlbach et al., 2016). However, despite the importance of these relational factors, the limited number of interventions highlighted a gap in addressing this crucial area, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive strategies to improve teacher-student dynamics and their impact on immigrant

students' educational trajectories. with little focus on teacher training to counteract biases or strategies to increase parental engagement.

Additionally, some of the reviewed interventions adopted a multifactorial approach to address the interplay of challenges. These studies offered combined support, psychological, financial, and linguistic (e.g., Dearing et al., 2016; Matthews & Mellom, 2012), with a few also involving families (Ammar et al., 2021). These practices were designed especially for newcomer students, these comprehensive programs proved effective by facilitating better integration through community support, language acquisition, and social inclusion for both students and their families. This approach underscores a critical gap in the broader landscape of interventions, where most programs target isolated factors without considering the interconnected nature of the challenges immigrant students face. The reviewed literature highlights a clear need for more holistic strategies that address multiple barriers simultaneously to enhance the educational outcomes of these students.

The limited relational interventions and community support initiatives were primarily concentrated at the middle school level. These programs aimed to enhance peer relationships (e.g., Matthews & Mellom, 2012), reflecting the pivotal role peers play in identity development and emotional support during early adolescence. This focus aligns with evidence emphasizing the pivotal role of peers in identity development and emotional support during early adolescence, a phase when peer acceptance strongly influences academic achievement (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Gallardo, 2016).

Interventions at the elementary school level are less common. They focus on foundational relationships, emphasizing teacher and parent involvement (Duque, 1995). This approach highlights the critical role of early parental support in fostering motivation and achievement (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Expectancy-value theory also underscores the importance of parental influence on students' motivation and outcomes (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). More research is needed to integrate teacher and parental involvement at this stage.

While some of the interventions address critical aspects of immigrant students' academic struggles, many fall short of tackling the nuanced and multifactorial issues faced in this context. The predominance of US-based studies limits the relevance of these interventions to the European context. While many interventions target ethnic and racial minority students in the US, their experiences, though overlapping, differ from those of immigrant students in Europe and Italy. In contrast, relatively few intervention studies have been conducted in Europe (e.g., Celeste et al., 2021; de Jong et al., 2016; Juang et al., 2020). Structural differences between the US and European educational systems significantly influence the implementation and

effectiveness of interventions for migrant students. Key differences include varying preschool enrollment rates, Europe's rigid early tracking versus the flexible high school system in the US, the overrepresentation of migrant students in special education, and socio-economic segregation (Heckmann, 2008). In Italy, for instance, interventions for immigrant students are often integrated with programs aimed at facilitating their academic progression into higher education tracks (Borgna et al., 2022).

To bridge the gap between identified challenges and implemented interventions, future efforts must adopt a holistic and context-specific approach. First, interventions should address socioeconomic disparities by offering financial and academic support to immigrant families, such as scholarships, mentoring, and access to additional learning resources. Second, tailored language support programs should be developed to enable immigrant students to overcome linguistic barriers early, ensuring smoother curriculum integration.

Teacher training programs that reduce biases and promote cultural competence are essential to create more equitable learning environments. Similarly, parental engagement strategies, such as workshops, counseling, and community outreach, should be prioritized to strengthen family involvement in educational decision-making. Finally, future research should focus on European-based longitudinal studies that evaluate the effectiveness of culturally relevant interventions tailored to systemic challenges like those observed for immigrant students in Italy.

By aligning intervention strategies more closely with the realities faced by immigrant students in Italy, it becomes possible to address the academic achievement gap more effectively. Tailored approaches that integrate socioeconomic, linguistic, and relational dimensions are essential for fostering equitable opportunities for all students.

7.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This research contributes to the literature of academic achievement gap among immigrant students, with a particular focus on Italy.

The research adopted a multi-method approach, incorporating both literature reviews and empirical studies to examine the socio-economic, cultural, relational, and psychological factors influencing academic achievement among immigrant students. The research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, providing a nuanced perspective that incorporates the views of key stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents) along with statistical analysis of the relationships between various factors and academic outcomes.

While the research provides significant contributions to understanding of the achievement gap, it also has several limitations and areas for improvement.

One of the primary limitations of this research lies in its narrow geographic focus. While the studies offer insights into immigrant students, specifically in Italy, the limited geographic scope may reduce the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Italy or other countries with different educational systems and socio-cultural contexts. Future research should expand the geographic scope to include a more diverse range of countries, particularly in Europe, to capture a broader spectrum of experiences and influences on academic achievement.

The reliance on self-reported data in some of the studies also presents a potential limitation. For example, studies based on adolescents' and parents' reports of family income and socio-economic status may be subject to biases, such as socially desirable responses or misreporting. Additionally, among parents involved in the correlational study, many participants avoided providing information about their socio-economic status. As a consequence, a significant amount of missing data, particularly regarding socio-economic status, limited the depth of analysis in some studies. Future research should employ strategies to minimize response biases, such as ensuring anonymity, using more objective measures of socio-economic status (e.g., school-level SES data), and improving response rates for sensitive questions.

Although Verona ranks as the 7th city in Italy for non-native students, with 17.2% of the total school population, there are 4,586 immigrant students out of 27,117 in lower secondary schools (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2024). Involving all schools in the research program and recruiting all these students was not feasible. Future research should involve larger samples. This limitation resulted in only a small portion of the participant group being composed of immigrant students.

As an additional limitation, the interactions between various factors affecting academic achievement could not be examined in the present project. This research focused on isolated factors without fully exploring how these factors intersect and influence academic outcomes together. While the correlation study focused on isolated factors due to the limited number of participants in this research project. This limitation was in line with existing literature, which often addresses individual factors separately due to the challenges of capturing the complex interplay between them (e.g., Froehlich et al., 2022; Glock et al., 2013; Govaris et al., 2021). In the case of qualitative study, the focus was primarily on exploring the individual experiences of immigrant students, without a direct examination of how these experiences intersect with socio-economic relational or institutional factors. Given the complex nature of the achievement

gap, future research would benefit from more integrated approaches that examine how multiple factors interact at the individual, relational, and institutional levels.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt more intersectional approaches, focused on the interaction of multiple factors influencing academic outcomes, integrating insights from education, psychology, sociology, and other relevant fields. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable, as they could provide a deeper understanding of how the factors affecting academic achievement evolve over time and the long-term impact of interventions.

The composition of immigrant populations in different countries varies depending on their geopolitical contexts. For example, in the UK, immigrants predominantly come from India, Poland, Pakistan, Romania, and Ireland (Cuibus, 2024), while in Germany, they mainly originate from Eastern and Southern Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East (Coy et al., 2016). Italy, although a relatively recent destination for migration compared to these countries, hosts a more homogeneous mix of nationalities (ISTAT, 2022b). Therefore, future research should account for these contextual variations when investigating academic outcomes. Specifically, more research is needed in Italy, where studies on the academic experiences of immigrant students remain limited, despite the country's growing immigrant population and unique educational system.

Expanding the scope of studies to include immigrant students in different educational settings, such as primary, secondary, and tertiary education, could provide more comprehensive insights into the factors influencing academic achievement at various stages of the educational journey. A broader understanding of these stages would help identify when interventions are most effective and how challenges evolve over time.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the multifaceted nature of the achievement gap, emphasizing the roles of socio-economic status, cultural differences, relational dynamics, language proficiency, and psychological factors. Addressing these complex and interconnected barriers requires a holistic and context-sensitive approach that integrates practices and policies at both micro and macro levels to foster better integration and inclusion. With the growing phenomenon of immigration, ensuring equitable educational opportunities for immigrant students not only promotes academic success but also strengthens multiculturalism, contributing to a more inclusive society and preparing better-educated future citizens.

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